

Studying abroad is described as a life changing experience by pretty much everyone that has ever studied in a different country, and I've been saying the same thing ever since I got back. Going abroad, I was focused on improving my Spanish skills and learning as much as I could about Spanish culture in the short amount of time I had there. From the moment I landed in Seville, Spain, I was in awe of how rich and vibrant the culture, history, and traditions of the city are. That first night, I went to the Plaza de España and the sight of such a timeless architectural masterpiece with such intricate detail and vibrant colors instantly turned all of the nervous energy that I was feeling into excitement for all of the amazing experiences that were still yet to come. Living in Spain for four months was challenging but those challenges allowed me to grow not only academically and professionally, but also personally in so many ways.

One of the most striking differences that I noticed about Spanish culture was how calm the pace of life was compared to in the United States. Being from Charleston, I thought that we were already a relatively relaxed community, but when I came back after my time in Seville, I felt like I was sprinting down the sidewalks at the pace I used to think was comfortable. With that calming pace came the emphasis of social connections on a daily basis. I noticed that there was an absence of cell phones in the hands of those sitting in outdoor restaurant seating, walking down the street, and even those just sitting on benches during downtime periods of their day. People would sit and talk at restaurants for a long time, even after finishing their meal, a concept I would later learn is so common that it actually has its own name: *sobremesa*! It wouldn't seem like it, but at first, this was a huge adjustment for me, but along the way I found myself loving this slower, more intentional pace of life.

If you go to different regions of the United States, the local gastronomy plays one of the most important roles in shaping the culture of that area, and Seville was no different. I was able to learn in depth the history and religious influences of Spanish cuisine in my Food and Culture in Spain course. Across different hands-on cooking classes, trips to the local Triana market, food tours of the city, and tasting of various spanish foods and drinks, I was able to delve into the connection between nutrition and heritage. I was challenged to analyze how religious laws in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity interacted to shape what we would now describe as not only Spanish gastronomy, but also Spanish culture as a whole and how drastically it differs from other areas of Europe. This experience reinforced my interest in the social and cultural dimensions of healthcare and deepened my appreciation for the ways in which cultural traditions influence patient interactions and medical approaches.

One of the most meaningful experiences I had while in Spain was the opportunity to participate in a traditional event as rich in culture as Seville's Féria de Abril, or April Fair. This is a week-long event that begins every year with the lighting of the La Portada at midnight into the first night of the fair. There are "las casetas" where there is traditional food and drinks and dancing and then another section of the fairgrounds has modern fair rides and cotton candy stands. The men are dressed in fancy suits and the women in colorful flamenco dresses, transporting you into a gorgeous scene of Spanish history. Almost 24/7 people enjoy the fiesta, only trudging home at 8 a.m. to take a quick nap and maybe once more during the late afternoon to take a quick break and siesta away from the intense Andalucian heat. This experience completely changed my perspective on the appreciation of cultural and community joy and well-being. Events

like these play such an important role in fostering cultural identities and as a future pediatric speech therapist, I believe that community engagements like this fair and the importance of other public events like Semana Santa (Holy Week) are essential for communication and cognitive well-being and development.

In addition to being incredibly immersed in Spanish traditions and culture, I also had the opportunity to briefly observe other European cultures during trips to countries like Ireland, Germany, Portugal, France, Italy and more. With each visit to a new country, I unlocked new perspectives on community interactions and observed the highs and lows of each area. I tried incredible foods and saw breathtaking landmarks that I had only ever dreamed of seeing in person, but I also witnessed protests against various community and global issues as well as varying levels of homelessness depending on the country. I got lost countless times but then was able to find my way. I challenged myself to try foods that were way out of my comfort zone and learned that I love escargot, bratwurst, and octopus. Each of these experiences, whether awe-inspiring or challenging, provided me with a deeper understanding of the world and my place in it. I gained knowledge on how important community events are for the social well-being of communities, not only in small communities, but bigger cities as well which is relatively uncommon in the big cities of United States. These travels not only broadened my cultural awareness but also reinforced my passion for working in a field that values communication, connection, and compassion.

My study abroad experience in Seville and other travel experiences across Europe provided me with so many new skills that will be extremely useful to bring into the future and professional environments. Navigating language barriers, social customs,

and immersion into diverse traditions increased my cultural awareness and adaptability. I became much more resilient after facing countless unexpected challenges, getting lost in unfamiliar cities, and pushing through the intense homesickness I felt at times. Most importantly, this experience further developed my communication skills, not only verbally, but also with body language and nonverbal cues. As I continue on my journey towards becoming a pediatric speech therapist, these experiences will enhance my ability to connect and communicate with children from different backgrounds.