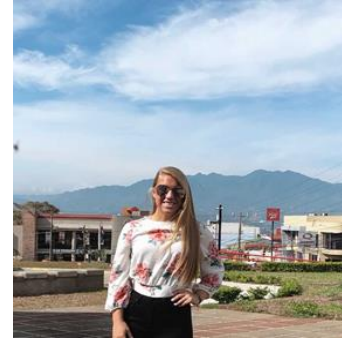


## Natalie Nagrant – Summer Study Abroad in Costa Rica

Studying abroad had always been a dream of mine since participating in an exchange program at my high school. For two weeks I went to Spain where I stayed with a host family and realized that being immersed in a different culture teaches more than a textbook ever could. I never knew exactly where I wanted to go to study abroad, however, I knew that I wanted to experience more cultures. After some college courses, I realized that not only did I want to experience the culture but the school systems as I started doing clinical hours in U.S classrooms. The application and preparation processes were intimidating as the trip came closer and closer with every blink of an eye. I didn't know what to expect and this scared me, but this also made me excited. This experience had been one of the most rewarding experiences not only for discovering myself but assisting in building the qualities and characteristics for my future teaching career.



Heredia, Costa Rica read one of the locations that offered clinical hours abroad. Not only did being in a foreign school intrigue me, but Heredia is my mom's maiden name. I believe that everything happens for a reason, and this was the right place for me to study. I studied Spanish in high school and felt comforted knowing that Spanish is spoken in Costa Rica. Unfortunately, I soon came to realize that I overestimated my ability to speak Spanish after not practicing it for 3 years. A language barrier was an obstacle I had to face while abroad, however, I am grateful that I was able to overcome this barrier. In previous courses, we have talked about problem-solving, and I was finally able to work on this skill while abroad. During this trip, I decided to take courses that would help me get an ESL endorsement since I was in line with my plan of study. This wasn't something I had to do, it rather something I wanted to do which made this experience worthwhile and meaningful.



Nervous, anxious, unprepared, lost, out of place, confused, etc. were all feelings I had while being abroad. These are the feeling emergent bilinguals (ELL) students feel daily and this experience put me in their shoes. At my homestay I relied on my roommate for communication with our host mom and in the schools, I relied on a fellow peer to translate what the students were saying. This dependency on others made it hard for me to take my observation notes for my coursework. I was still able to observe teaching styles and the school to the best of my abilities, but I learned beyond these things. I was given the perspective from an emergent bilingual and this I value very much. Each day I learned a little more and gained some independence. However, it took hard work, and many supports to do so.

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Two weeks and five schools in Heredia, Costa Rica made time fly, however, I was able to experience a lot for that time frame. Not only did I learn about the culture in Costa Rica, but I also got to learn about the education system. During my experience, I visited 5 schools, between these schools I was able to experience urban vs. rural, private vs. public, and high school vs. elementary school ages. These diverse settings are what gave me exposure to the education system as a whole in Costa Rica. During the days, we spent times at the schools and explored our town in the afternoons. On the other days, we were provided with excursions such as learning how to make chocolate, being on a farm, and visiting the Poas volcano. These excursions were not only interactive and beautiful, but they were educational. We learn how to make chocolate in addition to where the cocoa bean came from and how it has grown to be popular in this region. On the farm, we were able to learn the proper way to eat a strawberry and how farmers have a significant role in society. We were in town to celebrate farmers day for this as well. What was special about these class trips is that we had to travel up mountains to get to the places. Not only did we learn about the history and Costa Rican culture, but we were also able to see the beauty of the country from different parts.



This trip gave me the opportunity to try things I would have not done back in my hometown. One trip my peers and I coordinated was ziplining in Manuel Antonio. We were given a free day and as a group worked together to order tickets. On this excursion there were ten different courses and we could see the forest in Costa Rica as we zipped through it. The air was so fresh, the view was so clear, and I felt so free. I could have zipped lined somewhere in the United States, however, something about the tropics made me capture this moment. I can still remember the feeling as if I was on the zip line course today. After we were given a traditional meal and socialized with the workers. Getting opportunities to explore in such a manner was valuable to me as I was able to see Costa Rica and its culture as being unique rather than simply “different”.



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This experience has aided me to become a personable and knowledgeable future educator. I did not leave Costa Rica being bilingual, however, I learned how to communicate with others who speak different languages and collaborate effectively. I gained independence by trying new things such as food and by being on my own. By putting myself in the position of a minority I can better empathize and relate to my future students who are emergent bilinguals or new to the school. I understand these feelings students may feel better by having experienced this trip. With supports and positive teacher-student relationships, I can aid my students in the classroom so that they can succeed and learn new skills or material. I have learned that these supports may include non-verbal cues such as pointing or using Google Translate/technology. It's all about helping the individual student and therefore as a future educator I want to focus on equity over equality. That is, making sure I can help my students in a way where they all can succeed in the classroom environment given the necessary resources for themselves. As I reflect on what this experience has brought me, I believe it's something that all future educators should experience if the opportunity presents itself. Not only do you learn to be sensitive to others, but it helps build your character before working with families from different backgrounds so that you may collaborate effectively with them. Studying abroad teaches lessons that you would be unable to learn in a textbook. I will continue to use examples from my experience throughout my life and I work with others. As a future educator, it's important to recall that learning is a continuous process and we must use new information to support our students in the classroom. Studying abroad is an opportunity to broaden our views and see the world from a different lens. Without my donors, teachers, Illinois State University College of Education, and IFSA I would not have had a remarkable experience, for that, I am grateful.

