

College of Education: Panama Summer 2017

By: Anaclara Pinedo

Studying abroad in Panama has been one of my greatest decisions. I had not been out of the country since I was in grade school. My group and I stayed with a host family in Panama City. We also travelled outside the city for excursions such as visiting the Embera Tribe. While I was in Panama I was able to practice my native language while learning about a different dialect from my own. It was super interesting to learn a variety of words that are from Panama and nearby countries. For example, young adults and adolescents say, “Que Xopa” to say hi to one another. Panama is quite diverse and many from nearby countries visitor decide to uproot themselves and move there. Individuals from China and the Middle East make up a large sum of those who have immigrated to the country. Wanting to have my own bilingual classroom, I wanted to immerse myself in a different culture than my own to become more knowledgeable about other Spanish speaking countries.



I was a little nervous to go abroad and be in a bilingual school. I was in a bilingual program myself growing up and I was able to compare and contrast my personal experience with the Panamanian school I was in. I grew up speaking Spanish at home and took native Spanish courses in high school, but I was not sure how formal my Spanish was. Although, knowing the language did make it easier to travel around the country, and helped break the ice with a variety of people. It was also super cool to learn their slang and phrases. My Spanish definitely got stronger while being abroad. I must admit, I believe the first grade class I was in for six weeks knew more English than I did, at their age. In Panama, the private education system is the best one to attend and therefore we were placed in a private school. The school was from K-12 and students that attend are from families that are well off. Being that English is taught as the second language both in the school I was observing and in my own country, it was quite surprising to see a new student whose native



tongue wasn't Spanish. I was able to see how the school handles ESL: switching between teaching Spanish while continuing to grow his English. I was able to further compare and contrast the system I was in the states with the one in Panama.

It was a great experience having a host family because they ease the anxiety of being a foreigner and are more than happy to show the ins and outs. Dinners were always a good time to reflect to our host mom what we have noticed and get more insight about growing up in Panama and its' history in general. Having authentic, home-cooked Panamanian food for both breakfast and dinner was a real treat.



The program was faculty led as well because we had a schedule for classes and excursions. Every Friday and Saturday we were taken to see different parts of the city or country. This allowed us to learn the history, and explore the culture firsthand. Picking which event was my favorite is hard because I enjoyed everything we did. Two events that stand out, however, were visiting the Panama Canal and Isla Grande. Going to see the Panama Canal was eye dropping. Seeing how the canal works and was built. During the visit, I was able to learn how the United States influenced Panama. When visiting to Isla Grande, we saw the Caribbean side of the ocean and visited an old pirate fighting location. I also experienced my first live soccer game, Panama playing against Honduras. We had Salsa lessons from a professional dancer. Overall, I enjoyed seeing the Panamanian culture through different settings and events.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have studied abroad. Transferring to Illinois State University, I was interested in finding a program that would fit into my schedule. The best time for me was to go abroad for the summer term. I love that the program to go to Panama through the College of Education was the longest for the summer. Going abroad, I learned more about having a culturally diverse classroom. Having a bilingual classroom, my students can be from any Spanish speaking country, which goes into differences in culture and dialects. The experience has educated me as a global citizen by learning about a different education system, government, and economics system. The United



States has a huge influence in Panama where the U.S. money is accepted, but Panama also has their own coins like the balboa, which is a dollar. As a future educator. I have a better understanding how students learn and how their culture influences them as a student. I hope to incorporate my experience into having a classroom that talks about geography, culture, and language so my students can become multicultural. Lastly, I hope to inspire my students to become global citizens by creating our own worldly adventures in my classroom. I believe it is important for educators to experience study abroad because you learn about different cultures and languages allowing for insight on teaching students who come from all different backgrounds.

