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Exploring the World & Shaping my Career

Since I was a little girl, I dreamed of seeing the world. I have dreamed of exploring unfamiliar places, meeting new people, and embracing the complexities and intricacies of diverse cultures, from traditions to daily life. I wanted to experience what the world has to offer, to embrace first-hand the places that are so uniquely their own, while allowing me to better understand the interconnectedness of our global community. I dreamed of becoming comfortable with the uncomfortable and I wanted to push myself beyond the comfort of routine and immerse myself into a new environment. This passion for travel and exploration has remained close to my heart and remains a driving force in my life today. As I approached my senior year of high school, I decided to pursue a degree in Environmental Science, driven by my growing concern about the future of our planet in the midst of a climate crisis. I wanted to contribute to a sustainable future, and work towards creating solutions for ongoing environmental issues. I felt a deep responsibility to do my part in making the world a better place to ensure that future generations can aspire to explore its beauty too.

Combining my passions for exploration and the environment, I knew that studying abroad was essential to gain a global perspective on environmental issues, while also exploring an unfamiliar place. I had the incredible opportunity to study abroad in Rotterdam, Netherlands and following my program, an internship opportunity in Stockholm, Sweden focused on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles in the commercial real estate sector.

ESG is quickly becoming a crucial framework for sustainable development, and I found it ideal to learn about it in an environment that prioritizes it in their everyday business practice.

Although I was unable to take Environmental Science major courses abroad due to credit transfer issues, this challenge only drove my ambition to pursue an internship in the field. My study abroad and High Impact Practice (HIP) experiences, both academically and professionally, have not only shaped my career but have also fostered significant personal growth. Living and working far from home for 8 months has allowed me to develop crucial skills in self-awareness, independence, and adaptability that has allowed me to be more transparent on how I respond to change and how I can stay grounded in unfamiliar environments, skills that will continue to shape my future endeavors and career goals.

Throughout my study abroad experience and HIP, I gained a deeper understanding of myself, and my sense of self-awareness broadened. I approached every weekend trip, class, and bump in the road with the mindset that “the world is my oyster,” allowing myself to grow everyday. I quickly became more comfortable in navigating everyday life in Europe and interacting with people from all over the world. In fact, some of the best friends I met were from Hong Kong and London. I gained an awareness of myself where, according to research, I can adapt to unfamiliar situations, interact with a diverse environment, and embrace different viewpoints and perspectives in ways that makes me excited about change (Gaia, 2015). Studying abroad has introduced me to pursuing a life abroad if the opportunity arose, something I haven’t been self-aware of before. I fell in love with the Dutch lifestyle, culture, transportation systems, everyday norms, night life, and so much more.

In addition to self-awareness, my study abroad and HIP challenged me to be independent and adaptable. I have always been independent in nature, but my independence was further

challenged abroad. I decided to do my program alone, without going with any of my friends from school, to get a truly authentic and foreign experience. I lived with three men who were all in their late twenties, either working or starting their own business. They were from India, France, and Spain. You could say we were a very diverse apartment. I got a bike, which easily became my primary mode of transportation, and allowed me to adapt to the bike-centric culture of the Netherlands. In addition, I attended class, and traveled almost every weekend to explore a new city or country. During my time abroad, I traveled to 16 countries, and over 20 cities. I was eager to see the world, travel to different cities, and appreciate how each country is so unique in its own architecture and food, but I still recognized the shared European culture that connects them. Through my consistent weekend trips, I became self-aware of how easy going I am, how comfortable I am being alone, and how adaptable I am in unfamiliar situations, making me feel excited instead of overwhelmed in new environments.

In the midst of my study abroad and HIP, I took several solo trips to cities like Copenhagen, Croatia, and Paris. These trips highlight my independence and ability to problem-solve when landing in a new city with a foreign transportation system, language, norms, and more. Transportation was pretty similar from one city to the next, making it easier for me to get accustomed to different systems such as metros, buses, and trolleys independently. I felt that I was most in tune with myself when traveling to a new city alone as I was free to follow my own schedule, and make spontaneous decisions which made each city personally memorable. For example, during a solo weekend in Copenhagen, I indulged in a long-awaited visit to a pastry shop, spent time shopping, did some tourist site seeing that interested me (which probably wouldn't interest many of my friends), and went to every restaurant I had been eager to try.

Even though I also loved traveling to other cities with my friends, there was something uniquely special about exploring a new city on my own where I was alone, and truly independent.

In addition to growing personally, my HIP experience also played a key role in my professional development. I worked in the city of Stockholm, where I commuted on the metro everyday, and was one of the only Americans in a predominantly Swedish office. During 75% of my internship, I worked independently largely due to the vast work-life culture difference. In Sweden and in most of Europe, the work-life balance is much more prioritized. In the summer months, they take around 4-6 weeks off to rest, recharge, and enjoy the sunshine. While Americans often work throughout the summer, I had assumed Europeans did the same. I came to realize that the office was virtually empty from late June/early July until the beginning of August, revealing their dedication to maintaining a healthy work-life balance. This is a heavy difference compared to the American work culture, where there is pressure to always be working. We inhabit a lifestyle of “live to work”, rather than “work to live”, which often leads to various implications such as burnout and unproductivity. Although much of the office was empty during my work week, this did not take away from my goal to gain an international perspective on sustainability.

Throughout my internship, I was able to learn from and work alongside expert consultants in ESG as well as do research for the CEO. I wrote articles based on the company's 2023 ESG report, highlighting five crucial achievements that all align with my goal to gain familiarity in ESG reporting frameworks. This included achievements in EU Taxonomy Alignment (a standard that defines a sustainable business practice), the conduction of a GHG inventory assessment to be used to set targets with the Science Based Targets Initiative (SBTi), the integration of a human rights due diligence, on-site energy investments, and enhanced data

accuracy. In order for me to learn and write drafts about these topics, I had to work with and gain insights from consultants that are essentially experts on each of these topics. Thus, I learned a tremendous amount on these topics individually, but I also learned how these sustainability initiatives were integrated within Genesta's business practice and within the commercial real estate sector. In addition to this project, I also worked on various research projects for the CEO. I did research on three topics that included GHG Protocol Modifications (potential future modifications to the Greenhouse Gas Protocol), internal carbon pricing (integrating carbon into investments), and green seasonal energy batteries. In Sweden, they get 3-4 hours of sunlight during the winter and sunlight for 18-20 hours during the summer. Thus, their solar panels are not effective during the winter but are very effective during the summer months. The CEO wanted to find a way to store this energy that was generated during the summer, to be used in the winter months. The battery had to be capable of storing large amounts of energy for long periods of time. Additionally, the battery had to be green, instead of a lithium-ion battery as lithium-ion batteries are resource-intensive to produce (rely on raw materials such as lithium and cobalt) and pose various environmental and recycling challenges due to their chemical composition. I was able to find a startup out of Finland called Polar Night Energy that developed a battery where sand was the storage medium heated to 600°C and has the capability of storing energy for long periods of time. I presented these findings to the CEO and he worked to get in touch with the company the next week. This work has allowed me to gain familiarity with various ESG and sustainability frameworks as well as how investments in sustainable initiatives are valuable in cutting an organization's Greenhouse Gas emissions and overall sustainability, all of which will be very valuable in my future career.

In conclusion, my study abroad and internship experiences have been transformative for both my personal and professional growth. Through my study abroad and HIP experience, I was able to be abroad for a total of 8 months, allowing me to travel and fulfill my passion for exploration while also gaining experience in my field to contribute to a sustainable future. I want to contribute to real, meaningful solutions to environmental challenges and I think that my internship abroad was a great starting point in gaining experience in the field, and I feel more confident and comfortable entering the corporate sustainability realm. Additionally, I have developed a great sense of intercultural competence by embracing and experiencing the culture of the Netherlands, Sweden, and many more (Maharaja, 2018). From learning the principles of ESG to traveling to 16 countries across Europe, each experience has reinforced my passion and interests in travel and sustainability. I am confident that I will carry the skills that I have learned from my unforgettable 8 months into my future career and lifestyle. Self-awareness, independence, and adaptability have not only deepened my understanding of myself but also have enabled me to navigate unfamiliar environments with confidence and grace.

Works Cited

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