

Episode 05

Ignacio Messana

H: Welcome to Noles Abroad, a podcast by Florida State University International Programs! I'm Hannah

Z: And I'm Zoe! And we are your hosts. On this podcast we'll talk about study abroad from the perspective of the students, faculty, staff, and alumni who make it an experience worth sharing. We'll also bring you travel tips and fun facts from around the globe.

Z: For this episode, we caught up with Dr. Ignacio Messana, director of FSU Valencia to learn about how FSU chose Valencia as its home in Spain. We'll hear about the history of the Fallas festival and all the different types of paella found in Valencia. Lets jump into our conversation with Ignacio. First off, can you introduce yourself to our listeners?

Ignacio (I): My name is Ignacio Messana, Dr. Messana, I'm the Director of the program of Florida State University International Programs in Valencia, Spain.

Z: Great! And can you tell us a little bit more about that role at FSU Valencia and what led you there?

I: Yes. I'm the director of the program and then I also act related to academic issues as the Dean of Studies for the students or faculty about any needs that they may have when they are here in Valencia. And then as director of the program, probably the most important thing is that I coordinate a team of very good professionals as staff and faculty that are the ones that we all together take care of the students when they come here.

Z: And how long have you been there as director?

I: Okay that sounds like a question with an interesting answer. It's going to be 20 years in 2 or 3 months.

H: Could you give us a brief history of FSU in Spain?

I: Yes, and I will also add here a little bit about when I joined FSU. I was working at a private company in Valencia and about to change jobs and going to a different company to my dream job and I had already been interviewed and approved for that job and while I was in that process

I used to go to the building where FSU had just arrived two months before that in May and I used to go there and wait for my wife to finish her working shift at the local branch of a bank and I met the previous director of Florida State University in Valencia. And it was wonderful because without doing a job interview, our relations started being a job interview. He needed some help and he met someone who was fluent in Spanish and fluent in English and we started knowing each other in a very casual, nice environment and that gentleman called Dr. Bob Smith called Dr. Pitts and said I would like you to interview someone in Valencia and that's where it all started. I interviewed Dr. Pitts with his very interesting Kentucky accent on the phone and I did my best to understand all that he was saying and in the month of July or August I was starting working for FSU in Valencia. And then about the history of FSU in Spain. FSU had a summer program in Spain, specifically in Madrid most of the time, for I think it was two, three, four summers before deciding in 1997 or 98 they decided to have a permanent program in Spain. So they started it in Madrid, I think they were in Madrid around a year. For different reasons they tried to move the program to a place in the south of Spain. Beautiful location, beautiful weather, nice environment but for a couple of reasons it was not the perfect location. One, it was too touristic destination and the other one it was a little smaller and it couldn't have the same amount of cultural facilities and events going on . So when they were in that palace in Malaga, FSU with the previous director I told you they did a short trip, by coincidence to Valencia, I think they were going to Madrid but they changed it last minute to come to Valencia. And they landed in, well they arrived with a bus, in Valencia in February of the year 2000 and they found here in Valencia, a week during the month of February with beautiful weather, beautiful sea views, seafront and they found a dorm, brand new, it had been inaugurated a few months before and they stayed in that dorm that had plenty of rooms for students and other facilities and it was like 10-15 minutes walking from the beach and it was beautiful being February and so you can imagine. And I think Dr. Smith called Dr. Pitts and said you need to come see Valencia, I think this is the place where we should be. So Dr. Pitts arrived in Valencia a month later and he also liked it a lot. I think his first trip to Valencia is probably a good story for another podcast so I'll just leave it there and they decided to start, to move the program to Valencia to that dorm. They moved it in May of 2000, the first summer program in May of 2000. During that summer program I met Dr. Smith and then I joined them in July/August 2000. We stayed in that same dorm, called Galileo Galilei that was, and that was part of the beautiful thing of it, inside one of the most important universities in Valencia and in Spain, the Polytechnic University of Valencia, a very well ranked technical university. And that made our life with a very good combination of our own dorm and facilities but also sharing our life and experiences with local students at a local university.

Z: That's wonderful, I think this question kind of goes along with that, but what would you say is the relationship between FSU Valencia with the surrounding location because I know you do have a close relationship with the Polytechnic University in Valencia.

I: Yes, and I would like to explain two sides of it. On one hand when we were at the Polytechnic University of Valencia, we created bonds that we've been using since then. When our life was there, our students were sharing common areas, luncheon rooms and classroom space and even outdoors areas of the campus with local students. In exchange, the campus was a little bit outside of the city so our students could not walk to shopping areas or downtown areas. Now in

the year 2007 we moved the program to our grand, owned facilities in the downtown of Valencia. Facilities that we bought in the year 2004-2005 and we started using in 2007. That made the other type of immersion in the Valencian society that we are really proud of. That made us have our students and our faculty and ourselves, living right in the middle of the most beautiful downtown area of Valencia. That means that our students, every single day when they go outside of the doors of our study center, they are in an area where local Valencia people with their kids, with their grandpas, their grandmas, where they go doing their normal shopping. They have to share moments with them and then at the same time they are in the middle of the most important cultural and social places of Valencia. Both related to politics, we are 5 mins away to the equivalent of the capital of the region of Valencia, less than 3 minutes to the governor's house equivalent here, very close to the religious and administrative centers and very close to even the cultural places theatres, musical areas and things like that. So we've been using that a lot first by the students living in the middle of that, and second by creating activities that are always making us do combined activities with local students and with local Valencians.

H: Wonderful, I think you've kind of shared a little about this already, just through the relationships you've been able to build and some of the cool things that students are able to experience just by nature of the location of the study center but what would you say is the most unique thing about studying abroad in Valencia?

I: About those relations, we created beautiful relations with students from different local universities and even high schools in some cases that are very close to our building. We also created a beautiful bond with City Hall of Valencia and with some other political institutions including having our students being received by the mayor of the city, by the governor of the region and interacting, we've had many students interning at political institutions of the city and the region of Valencia. But I think we have also created, by the way, nice bonds with sports or teams institutions in Valencia. Even with cultural events like bullfighting or traditions like that but, I think the most beautiful bond is one that is very Valencian style. And it is that because of the location of our study center we are one more neighbor of the Fallas association of our neighborhood. So we created a relationship with them with the good collaboration, they made us some years ago, honorary members of the Falla. They bring, every single year they come and bring a present for us in the style of a plaque or a painting or a ceramic tile. Every year we offer them and they use our facilities to host some of their meetings in our facilities. And then every year when the Fallas big event week arrives, we are one more neighbor of that Fallas house and we go to their activities, to their events, we participate in their luncheons and last but not least, one or more of our students get to parade with them, in one of the most important events of Fallas. So I think that's one of the most unique institutions that we are partners with here in Valencia.

H: Could you tell our listeners a little bit, for those who don't know what Fallas is, or who haven't studied abroad in Valencia, I know that's so important to Valencia and to our program, could you just give us a little overview of what Fallas is?

I: Yes. We would probably speak more about Valencia as a city, both about the history and about the style and design of the city. And it's a beautiful one with a good size, with a nice climate. But we have a very peculiar festivity, a very peculiar festival happening in the city and obviously in the states it could be more or less known but, for you to understand it is, in Europe and in Spain, it is as big or more as the Mardi Gras in New Orleans, as big or more as the running with the bulls week in Pamplona and it's a very peculiar one. It's a celebration that started almost 200 years ago in Valencia. It started as a small thing that the carpenters of the city did to celebrate three things. One was the end of the winter and with the end of the winter, the start of days that were getting longer, the start of better climate and also the cleaning of the workshops of those carpenters and being able to get rid of all those remains or materials that they didn't need anymore. Second, the moment when we are turning from the winter into the spring coincides, or is very close, to March 19th which is the day that the Catholic Christians celebrate the day for St. Joseph and St. Joseph is the patron saint for the carpenters. So they combined those two things and they started doing on the day of St. Joseph, March 19th, a celebration where they were bringing out all the remains from their workshop and setting them on fire at midnight on the night from the 18th to the 19th. Little by little in these 200 years they started, first they were only taking out all those remains and setting them on fire, then they started because they were carpenters, building little things with those pieces of wood and when they started doing that two things happened. One was that as soon as they all realized they were building things, a few years later a competition started to see who was building something funnier or more beautiful or bigger or more spectacular, number one and number two they started looking for what to speak about in that big sculpture that they were building and it had to be something very local, something very close to the people and at the same time something very, I don't know if you have the world futile, or something that was short in length because it was only going to be there expressing that information to the people for a week and then, no matter how beautiful it was, no matter how big it was, it was going to be set on fire at midnight from the 18th to the 19th. So because of that, they continued and now we have over 380 neighborhoods that set up one Falla, that is one of those monuments, that is sometimes three, four floors high and another one for the children that is one floor high so in total they set up around 800 Fallas.

Z: That's incredible, I hope to be able to see it someday, it sounds so amazing.

I: I hope you can, yes.

Z: Alright, so our last question for you is just something that we're asking all of our directors but we want to know, what is your favorite traditional Spanish food?

I: I spoke earlier about the city of Valencia and what makes us unique, and honestly I think that's one of the inputs that all students value the most and faculty when they come to study or teach here. And it's the combination of the size of the city, the beauty, the climate, the importance of the Spanish language and culture and having the beach and the sea as part of

the city. So all that is one of the things that makes us unique. But one of the things that makes us unique also is a plate or a dish, a meal that you all know around the world, or everyone knows around the world, pronounced in a way or another, that's part of the fun of it, that we say pie-eha, that all my Irish family and friends they say pie-ella and that everyone pronounces in a different way. Paella is a plate that includes all that is part of the Spanish culture and style. It's a cooking all together plate, it's a plate that you need to be cooking for a couple of hours, it's a plate that needs patience and tradition and it's a plate the people here not only enjoy eating it but also enjoy cooking it. And the cooking it is a social event. Paella is one of my favorite Spanish food and also because Paella is the plate that has been cooked in a type of pan that we also call Paella that combines frying at the beginning and boiling at the second part and then a very important timing for the boiling being the exact time for the rice to be perfectly cooked and at the same time perfectly dry. So that can be cooked either meat or seafood, it can include artichokes. It can include, if it's seafood, the ink of the squids and it's called the black rice. It can be only seafood but all clean and they call it the young lord or the young lady seafood paella because they don't need to get their hands dirty by cleaning the seafood. So all of those types make it a nice variety that you can try 2 or 3 times per week and you never get bored of it.

Z: That sounds fantastic. I would love to eat some right now.

I: Thank you.

Z: Great, well that's all the questions we have for you. Thank you so much, it's been such a pleasure to talk to you today!

I: Likewise, thank you bye-bye!

Z: Before we disembark, we wanted to share a little about one of Valencia's main attractions: the City of Arts and Sciences. Valencia's City of Arts and Sciences is the home to Europe's largest aquarium, museums, an underwater restaurant, and more! Constructed in the late 90s, it comprises six areas: the opera house, IMAX and planetarium, outdoor sculpture garden, science museum, aquarium, and an event space.

H: The futuristic architecture of the City of Arts and Sciences is what led filmmakers to use the space for shows and films like Tomorrowland, Doctor Who, and WestWorld. The architecture is unique and eye-catching and we definitely encourage you to check out photos of the City on our blog. That way you can see how the planetarium resembles an eye (it even opens like one), how the museum looks like a whale skeleton, and how the aquarium was built to resemble a water lily.

Our FSU Valencia students enjoy walking or biking there along the riverbed park from the study center. FSU Valencia faculty also visit the City of Arts and Sciences for class excursions and social events.

H: If you have any questions or suggestions on what we should talk about in the future, email us at IP-Media@fsu.edu.

Thanks for tuning in, and we'll see you on our next episode where we talk to First Year Abroad alum, Christina Williams, about her time in Panama and Valencia and how study abroad challenges you to grow:

Christina: And it's never going to stop being a bit of a challenge because this is all new for you but it's such a learning process with every step that you take so with every excursion I learned something new, not only about the country but about myself.

Z: Thank you to Dr. Ignacio Messana for joining us today and to all of you for listening!

This podcast is a production of FSU International Programs. The music for this podcast was composed by John Bartmann. Our logo was designed by Vanessa Guirey. Editing, transcription, and research is done by us, Zoe Crook and Hannah Meister.