

Episode 06

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.

H: On today's episode you'll hear from Christina Williams, a First Year Abroad alum. She'll talk about her experiences in Panama and Valencia and how she compares studying abroad to climbing a mountain. Alrighty, hello, thanks for joining us Christina! How are you today?

Christina (C): I am well, I am so well. Thank you guys for having me.

H: Of course! We are so excited about this conversation, can't wait to talk to you, find out more about you and your experience. So first, why don't you start off, could you introduce yourself to our listeners? Who you are, where you call home, what's your major, where you studied, all those kinds of fun things.

C: Well hello everybody, I am Christina Elana Williams, I am from Atlanta, Georgia and I came down to Tallahassee to participate in the First Year Abroad program. My first, I'm a dual degree candidate and my first degree is Political Science with a minor in Law & Society and my second degree is Spanish and I'm using the Global Citizenship Certificate to serve as my second minor. So yes, I do come from Atlanta but I came down to Tallahassee to participate in the First Year Abroad program and I did Panama and Spain for an entire year and it was such an amazing, amazing experience.

Z: Awesome, so you mentioned that Spanish was one of your majors. I'm just curious, did that influence your decision to go abroad or is that why you went abroad?

C: Yah, so I did four years in high school of Spanish, so i was kind of like influenced by my Spanish teachers at the time to go out and explore new things and so I chose Panama and Spain specifically because I wanted to rehash and revamp my entire like Spanish acquisition process and so when I came back to Tallahassee after finishing I said you know what, I'm going to keep going, I've learned so much being abroad, I'm just going to keep continuing to learn Spanish so that's why I chose it as my second degree. As like you know I love the language, I

fell in love with the language, it's so much more than language, it's like an entire culture and I wanted to make sure that continued to be a part of my life even after I came back from being abroad.

H: I love that you mention how Spanish was more than a language, it was also a culture and I'm assuming that being in Central America and in Spain you got to really experience a lot of different cultures so I want to kind of talk about one thing in particular. For those who don't know, that is listening, students from all over Central and South America attend FSU Panama and students from the States can go and study abroad there. So what was it like being in such a culturally diverse academic, social, like all of those different settings, what was that like for you?

C: Yeah that first day when I landed in Panama it was like boom, it hit me. I realized that my neighbors, my roommates, everybody was from a different part of South America and I don't think I processed that, you know when I went to Panama. So it was such like, a surprise in such a positive way. We would often talk about each other's backgrounds, how we grew up, over dinner. I would listen to some of the Portuguese music that they would listen to, everything like that, it was something that I didn't expect so when I got there it became such a bigger learning experience than I could have ever imagined. So we would talk about how do you do laundry, do you do laundry? Things like that and to bigger things like what's your government system like back home, what are the things that you learn from your parents and so specifically when I went on campus I realized that what was interesting and what was so rewarding is that the things I had learned through the American school system is completely different from everyone else. So they would learn things more through a Latin lens and so I was learning about things that I never even knew existed. And so when you live with people that are from the Caribbean, that are from South America, Central America it's so interesting because they all have different accents, they all bring their own culture to Panama. It's like this big cultural expansion for me, who's just from Atlanta, Georgia and never had even been out of the country. So it was really rewarding. We love to love on each other, and learn from each other but I really got to see, that you know, there's a bigger world than you know just where I live and that's amazing. It was all in my backyard.

H: You mentioned that you had never been out of the country before participating in FYA. What was that decision process like for you? You were like you know, I've never done it before but I'm going to start college in a different country.

C: Yeah, it's a really funny story. So I came down for Accepted Students Day and I had plans on coming to Tallahassee come August and I came by the IP or International Programs table and there was a guy there named Casey and I'm looking at the pamphlets, they're so colorful and I'm like what's this about? And he starts to explain International Programs to me and the FYA program and the conversation, I'm having myself having to catch up with the rest of the group because we continued to talk, it was so intriguing. And so I literally came to FSU main campus thinking I'm going to Tallahassee and left making plans, we gotta get the passport together, it

was literally a 24-hour process for me, it was that quick. And so it was something I knew I wanted to complete or accomplish before I graduated and came back home but I did not expect it to be my first year which is why coming down and learning about IP was so cool because you learn about different programs you didn't know existed and so that entire process, it happened in one day but I knew I was really confident that I wanted to go forward because the entire team was just like we are going to take care of you, this is going to be an amazing process for you and I knew I would be coming out of it differently and so I was like you know what let's go for it. I've always wanted to put my foot out there and I definitely did it, so that was definitely that process.

Z: What an adventure. I think that study abroad is one big adventure and to go as a freshman is even more so maybe, so that's really awesome that you chose to do that.

C: Yah, I loved the program.

Z: Yah, it's great. So I'm curious what was similar or different between your time in Valencia versus your time in Panama and just how that related because obviously the programs are really different and yet there are similarities too, so can you just speak to that a little bit?

C: Yah so on a really basic level there's more opportunities that I got to be with the people of Panama when there, because there were less of the Americans that were over there. So I was literally, like we spoke about before, with people living with people that were from El Salvador, Costa Rica, countries in South America so we constantly had that contact, whereas there were just a few of us that were from the States. And that's the main difference between Panama and Valencia. Now the cool thing about Valencia is that you get to experience this new country with so many of your peers from the States. So that's the most basic, I think, contrast. Also with Panama, or with Spain, the campus is right below your room so that was so simple, that was so easy, I felt like everything was right where I needed it to be. In Panama you can walk to campus which is also a rewarding experience, it's just a little bit different. I think country wise, we have a Latin American country versus a European country so a lot of influences with Spain came from influences from France, Italy, I had so many different foods from all over the Mediterranean which was really amazing. Where as Panama it's all just in that hub so I think those are just some of the main differences. I mean you always meet people from all over in both countries, but some of the main differences is just where the campus is in respect to you and just how much contact you have with others that are from different places. But they're both really rewarding experiences which is why I'm glad that I chose both to have that contrast because Latin America is completely different from you know a European country. But I was blessed to be able to travel more when I went to Spain because everything is so, so close together and it's really inexpensive so you grab a buddy and you go to a different country and you learn some more. So those are the big differences.

H: Sounds like you got to experience the best of everything. It sounds like an ideal experience. I want to jump back to something you were talking about a little bit earlier, in terms of academics you mentioned that you chose to continue pursuing Spanish and adding that as, a major or a minor?

C: It's a major, it's like a whole degree, a BA.

H: Gotcha. So you decided to pursue that as a second major so can you just tell us a little bit about the academic impact of experiencing FYA was for you. I mean it's impacted your career, or your major choice but other sort of academic impacts did you get from this experience?

C: Well I got the biggest push I think I probably could have ever, you know, asked for. So the thing about being in Panama or any Spanish speaking country, Spanish is literally everywhere, in your grocery stores, your Uber drivers, your waiters, everyone is speaking Spanish to you, everything on the signs so it's like a never ending learning experience and you start to pick up different words in ways you're not even thinking about it. And so when I came back to Tallahassee and I started to take the classes on main campus I noticed that I was remembering those words from things that I literally would see on a sign. Another benefit is that when you live with people who are from Panama or from all over South and Central America, they all have different ways of pronouncing things, they all have their own different types of like slang and things like that, just like we do. And so you start to pick up on different accents and it helps you start to speak more like a native speaker and so I had that advantage being around you know my RA, you know my friends that I still, were still friends today, thank, so grateful for that. But literally you start to pick up on those accents so a lot of times your teachers will say you sound like a native, well it's because I was able to live there and really pick that up. So those are some of the advantages of like going abroad and coming back and continuing my studies, it really gave me that big push because I had a lot of, I had a really good hold of the diction, the grammar and everything like that. So I was a little bit ahead of the curve I believe because I was in a natural environment and my language acquisition was so much higher because I literally was seeing it everywhere I was going. And so yah, I think that that was what made me really want to continue and what helped me succeed as far as Spanish.

Z: That's incredible. We're also wondering just sort of, what was your favorite part of each location? I know you've kind of talked about that like with Panama being immersed and Valencia being able to travel but, could you just expand on that a little bit?

C: yah my favorite part of each location. So my favorite part about Panama was probably, well besides the people, the people were amazing but I think one of my favorite experiences about Panama was just being on those different excursions where we would literally test my limits every single month and we would go on these different challenges and we would see all these different people from the countryside to the beaches. I mean there were so many aspects to

Panama that you literally would not even think of just being in the city. So I think my favorite part about being in Panama was definitely the excursions because I had so many different experiences that really pushed me outside of my box. And so with Valencia or in Spain I think my favorite part about Spain is just, I'd never been in Europe so that entire culture was just so new to me but I really loved being able to travel, it was so easy. And not just travel outside of you know Spain, we went to Barcelona, we went to Madrid and everyone has their own pace in every city and so I think my favorite part about that was seeing how everyone would be in each city. And my other lowkey favorite part of mine is the art. The art in Spain is immaculate and I took an entire art class and we went every single day to a museum. It is like nothing I've ever seen before and it's so different. There's street art, the art you see in the churches, there's art in the museums and everything is so revered there, it's beautiful. So I think my favorite parts of Spain would have to be the art and seeing the different paces of life in the different cities around Spain and around Europe. I think those are my favorite parts.

H: You kind of eluded to it in your answer but you mentioned excursions and you also talked a little bit about a class that you took. So if you had to pinpoint one excursion or one class from your entire year abroad, what was your favorite? What was your favorite experience?

C: Okay, my favorite experience as far as excursions go, by far, we went to El Valle in Panama and we climbed a 400 meter mountain. It was so rewarding for me for kind of a deeper meaning because we were led there by like a 12 year old girl. She was literally going up the mountain in flip flops and here we are trying to lace up our shoes really tight and make sure we were on point. But we went up the mountain and while you are going up the mountain there's different nooks and crannies of like hidden treasures and there's rivers and everything. But then when you get almost to the top you have to be very careful and our tour guide, his name was Alexis, he's the best, he looked at me and he said Christina, "No fear," and I said "Okay." And so for me that entire, and then when we got up to the top of the mountain the view was amazing. It's something that doesn't really leave you and for me what makes it my favorite is because that entire journey up I really learned about myself and I learned about how like how you know sometimes in life it gets a little hard, you get hot, you get tired but on the journey up to the top there's all these hidden parts of life that are so rewarding and things you have to stop and take it in. They say you have to stop and smell the roses, that's what that meant for me. And when you're almost to the top, when you're almost to those goals you set out for yourself it may get the most tricky but then you have to tell yourself like have a little mini chat and say "You got this," and then when you get up to the top it's like "Man this is all I've worked for," and so that entire day it became like an analogy for me because of just the journey that we took, the stops that we made, that was probably my favorite excursion for so many reasons but it's still something that I think about when I have challenges today. Other than that the scenery was so beautiful. El Valle is outside of the city so the flowers seem to be brighter, the air is fresher, the people are so kind and so that probably has to be my favorite excursion out of the 12 months I was abroad because of the people, because of the atmosphere, because of the deeper meaning, it was beautiful for me. So for my favorite class, this is really ironic because I kind of go half and half. I love the art class but I have this class, I have a math class with Professor Chung, he's the best, in Panama, and I cannot do math to save my life but for me, he really challenged me, he explained math to me like I've never been explained math before but it was

on a personal level. He would allow me to come to his office hours and we really would break things down and he would be that person that would really encourage me when I felt like I couldn't do the work. And to have those personal relationships with a professor outside of your home country is something that I wasn't expecting but I was so glad that I had because we still speak today over some math problems from three years ago and I just really can appreciate the faculty and staff of both Panama and Valencia being so personable with us. When they visit the States we still give hugs, it was just so nice to know that I could have that amount of support academically and personally from a teacher. So definitely my math class and that's so surprising because I am not the math whizz at all, but that faculty is amazing down there.

Z: Going back to the metaphor that you talked about with the mountain which I think is so beautiful, how do you think that the metaphor of overcoming challenges and discomfort, how do you think that applies to the whole study abroad experience?

C: Yah, okay, great question. So when you get there, or when I got there, it was around August 17th if I'm not mistaken and so you had about 10 days to get your groceries, get acclimated and then September hits and then that whole, and we talked about it in one of my classes online that helps us to adjust, that whole month is just like "Where am I," but then you start to, its like that culture shock, and it happens but its like "Where am I, what am I doing, this is all new, everything is spanish, spanish, spanish, i speak English Oh no," but then like in the middle of the month things start to settle and so that's kind of like that journey up and I know its only in a months time but once you get to one of those places where you stop and smell the roses you're like okay I'm in Panama, I'm in London, I'm in Spain, wherever and you're like okay this is going to be good and you start to reach out to your roommates and you say let's go do this, reach out to your RA lets go do that, can you take me to the grocery store and you really start to speak to the people around you and you start to appreciate. And so that's just September for me but then you continue to go along until August again and it's just continuing to climb that mountain 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 each step you take so with every excursion I learned something new not only about the country but about myself and so that was another few miles, a few meters up. And so you would meet new people and you would learn something about their history and that's a few more meters up. And it's like once I got back or once I was literally crossing off the days until my entire year was over I realized I had probably reached that mountain top several times. Because there's always times when you're going to go up and down, up and down but it's like the scenery is beautiful, the people are beautiful, you're entire environment, the mere sake of the people that you live with, the people that get you in the grocery store. And so I think the metaphor for me is just continue to go up the mountain and do it again, and do it again and continue to challenge yourself. Find the beauty and find the passion behind everywhere you go because it's a never ending learning experience. So for me, yah like I said, I reached that mountain top 50 times and I had to challenge myself 50 times but everytime it was worth it. So when you're done with the mountain and you've left the village and you've flown back home you have all those memories of you climbing the mountain, all those people that were there, the 12 year old girl who did it so easy and you're looking like oh my god, you remember her and you just remember that you did it and you did it over again and over again and that you are capable of doing anything. Anything.

H: That's such a beautiful, just way to put it and just to imagine all the things that you will be able to accomplish in your lifetime, personally, professionally, academically, it seems from my perspective that it will come a little bit, not necessarily easier but you will be better prepared for it. You have experienced this and you've gone through this and now you're prepared for whatever comes your way and that's a really awesome thing to get out of a study abroad experience.

C: Thank you, yah I think about it all the time. It's a precious mountain, you should go.

Z: Well thank you so much for talking with us today.

C: Thank you for having me! It's so good to see you guys, it's always a pleasure to remember that whole entire year. I wish I could do it all the years of my life. I hope to go back to both locations again but I'm just grateful for the never ending opportunities and doors opened through Florida State's International Program and so looking back on that accepted students day I had no idea the path it would lead me to, whether I am back home in Atlanta or anywhere in the world. So thank you guys for choosing to speak with me and everything, thank you so much.

H: Thank you so much Christina, this was wonderful, it was so nice to hear your perspective.

Before we disembark, we want to share an upcoming virtual event with you!

At International Programs we believe studying abroad gives students a number of professional benefits, such as a global perspective, cross cultural communication skills, and it's certainly something that stands out on a resume or in a job interview.

Zoe: IP is partnering with the FSU Career Center to host a virtual career panel on Friday, July 17th at 11am Eastern. The panel will feature IP Alumni from across a number of industries and study abroad experiences - we have representatives from STEM, Communication, International Affairs and more. They will be answering questions about their study abroad experiences, so be sure to tune in to learn about how studying abroad can influence your career path! You can find a link to the session on social media or on the Podcast section of our blog! See you then!

Z: Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss our next episode where we talk to recent FSU alum and former IP Ambassador, Chris Bret-Harte:

Chris: If you're ever in a rut and you feel I don't know like there aren't enough opportunities out there, the world isn't offering you enough it's not as exciting, it's probably because you haven't seen enough of the world.

H: Thanks for listening, and thanks again to Christina for sharing your experience with us today!

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