

SE02EP09

Lauren Romanzak

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

Z: And I'm Zoe! And we're 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: In this episode we talk to IP staff member Lauren Romanzak, about her experience as a Program Assistant at the FSU London study center. Lauren is an FYA alum who has since worked in a variety of roles within International Programs. She shares a bit about her PA experience and gives advice for students considering applying to be a PA with International Program. Let's go to our conversation with Lauren now.

H: Hey Lauren, how are you?

Lauren (L): I'm doing well, how are you Hannah?

H: I'm doing good, to start us off this morning can you introduce yourself to our listeners?

L: Yes, my name is Lauren Romanzak, I graduated from FSU in 2017 with my undergrad degree. I studied International Affairs and English with a minor in Education and I'm currently working on my Masters degree, part time in International and Multicultural Education.

Z: Awesome well we're excited to have you on today. We want to know a little bit about your relationship with IP over the years. For our listeners Lauren is a staff member with International Programs, but can you just tell us about your journey through working in different roles with International Programs?

L: Sure so IP and I have had a pretty long term relationship. I studied abroad as part of the First Year Abroad program in 2014 and then went on to work as a student ambassador in the office after that. After I graduated I went back to London where I studied abroad, to work as a Program Assistant for six months and then after that I ended up interviewing and receiving a full time position in the office as a Program Coordinator and so that has led us all the way up until now.

Z: Wonderful and with that as well you've also helped students apply to become Program Assistants, right?

L: Yes, yeah that was one of my favorite aspects of the Program Coordinator role because it was an opportunity to be really student centric and have those conversations with students who are interested in having another kind of international experience so that was definitely one of my favorite aspects of the role.

H: So today we want to focus on your experience as a Program Assistant but ,before we jump into that can you explain what is a Program Assistant? What is that?

L: Sure, so a Program Assistant is generally somebody that's hired onto our staff at one of our study center locations or on a curriculum focused program that then provides support or assistance to that program. Generally, I think prior study abroad experience on the program is prioritized just because then you have that first-hand knowledge to assist students and another characteristic that can be prioritized too is language, applicable language, skills for the location in which you're applying so that's important to note too. But otherwise day-to-day what you're doing as a Program Assistant I think can kind of be split up into three different areas of duties. You are providing program support ,so that's just general assistance in the day-to-day function of the program, working in the administrative office, keeping up with records, making bookings on behalf of the program, that kind of thing. Then there is student support and that more refers to being there to advise students and be a positive example and role model to them, providing assistance for whatever they might come to you with whether it's personal concerns cultural concerns, social or travel related advice. And then the third area of duties would probably be housing assistance. So Program Assistants live in our program housing and they assist us in enforcing housing policies, kind of like an RA would back on main campus in Tallahassee.

H: We want to talk more about your own PA experience since that's something that so many students are interested in. Can you tell us first what was your decision ,what was your decision like to decide to apply to be a PA?

L: So I would say probably before my study abroad experience even ended I was already thinking of ways I could come back to it or continue with FSU, being involved with FSU IP. At the time I was in English Education major, so early in my undergrad career, and was kind of struggling to feel settled with that choice so study abroad opened my eyes to the field of international education as a whole and all the opportunities that lie within that. So that kind of shaped the rest of my college career between getting involved with the Center for Global Engagement and learning about the international student experience in the US and continuing to be involved with FSU IP. So then flash forward to graduation the PA role was something that I was certainly really interested in applying for since it provided firsthand experience with the implementation of a study abroad program but not just any study abroad program either, it was one I really cared about and one that had impacted me pretty greatly.

Z: So we want to know what was your favorite part of being a program assistant?

L:, I would say the people from the staff to the students, to the faculty at the London study center. It was really great to be a part of an organization that was so student centric through all those areas. Some of my closest friends I think have come from us working in the PA roll together. I gotten some really great professional and personal role models through the staff at the London study center. They're all so dedicated and informed and really do work to make decisions that put students first so that was really great example to learn from. And in terms of the student experience all the student cohorts when I was a PA where so enthusiastic and open minded in the face of all the newness of studying abroad so that was super rewarding to work with groups like that and kind of helps foster those traits in yourself too.

H: You mentioned before that even before you left London during your FYA experience that you were already ready to go back to London. So what was that experience like having the opportunity to go back a second time. What did you love most about that?

L: If you know me I'm probably a broken record, or sounding like one, from talking about how much I love London. So I had definitely grown to love the city during my time there as a student. Everything

from you know the live music, to public transport, to being super walkable. I just really love the lifestyle that London enables you to have when you're there so I was thrilled about the opportunity to go back get to work there. I again had that experience as a student but actually working and living there as an adult was another story, so that was a whole other experience to get used to. I think the opportunity to form relationships with friends and coworkers and have life that was a little bit more centered within the city than it was when I was a student provided some really great insight to working in a foreign country. That doesn't come without its challenges but I think one of the benefits of going through this challenges was giving me a heightened sense of independence.

Z: That's awesome, so many of our students talk about that independence that they gain with study abroad and then you know being able to go back as a PA was really, that sounds amazing as well. How did your PA experience influence your decision to study international education in your Masters?

L: I've always kind of known I wanted to go back and complete a Master's program but a big piece for me was wanting to get some work experience first. I truthfully had my eyes on the International Multicultural Education Masters at FSU since the time I was in undergrad but I think it is really valuable to have some work experience or some life experience, at least for me personally, to kind of help inform my decision to pursue that degree. So being able to work within international education and specifically like on site with the program, provided some awesome insight about like risk management and student support that I think is valuable in any area of international education you might go into. So I think it helped give me a little bit more broad of a background in which to go into the degree.

H: So I think it's pretty clear that you got quite a bit of value out of your PA experience, so what tips do you have for students who are interested in applying to be a Program Assistant for one of our programs in the future?

L: Yeah like you said I learned a lot from the role so I think that's the biggest takeaways from it. Some of them for me were learning how to balance fun with professionalism, especially in a work life balance that can get a little close sometimes, learning how to work as a team, learning how to be a planner but a super adaptive planner because things seem to never go as planned. So I think when you're applying for the PA role it's great if you can speak to those skills, or skills you might have that kind of fall into those different areas, but also taking some time to reflect on what you're hoping to learn or willing to work to learn in the role I think is and also an important approach to take when you're applying.

Z: So we would like to know for our last question, what advice you have for students considering study abroad?

L: Okay and I have a funny story about this one because on some IP publication somewhere from my freshman year I'm quoted answering this question and I say something like "Do not be too afraid, just go for it!" in a cheesy, funny way and my friends still poke fun at me about that quote. So I'm going to stand by that advice just with some further insight now. But whatever is, if you are considering study abroad and something is giving you pause about it, take some time to reflect on what that is. And then don't be afraid to ask questions. Our office is there to help support and as a resource to answer any questions, we can hopefully help alleviate whatever is giving you cause for hesitation. Study abroad definitely does require some degree of independence and openness to growth but when you have IP here for you you're supported along the way so definitely take advantage of those resources.

Z: That's such a great answer because you have that honesty in there about you know, if you have hesitations then be sure to talk about them because I think so many times students do have some hesitations and it's good to acknowledge that so that you know we can help students overcome their hesitations and just really go for it and have that experience of a lifetime. So that's great advice. Thanks so much for interviewing with us today, it's been a pleasure and thank you so much!

L: Yeah it was great talking with you all. Thanks for taking the time to interview me.

H: Thanks Lauren!

H: Before we disembark, let's revisit the topic of culture!

To continue our conversation about culture from some of our previous episodes, today we want to talk about a few differences in customs and social habits across cultures. Some customs we have in US culture can be considered peculiar in others.

Z: Following the customs of other cultures is a great way to practice cross-cultural communication. Here are a few examples of US customs that might be misunderstood in other cultures:

- One example is that in many Latin American countries, it can be considered bad form to arrive on time
- Another example is that certain hand gestures such as giving a thumbs up can be considered offensive in some countries.
- Another difference in customs is that in some places, including Australia and Scotland, it is considered rude to sit in the back seat of a cab.
- A final example is that using your left hand can be offensive in many countries, such as India or Sri Lanka.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but we hope it encourages you to do your research before traveling abroad! And remember, it's okay to mess up, but try to be open to corrections and new ways of doing things!

H: Study abroad week is happening now! Follow along on Instagram @fsuip to learn more about the events we have going on and how you can enter for a chance to win a \$500 airfare scholarship to be used towards one of our programs.

Thanks for listening and thanks to Lauren for chatting with us!

Z: This podcast is a production of FSU International Programs. The music was composed by John Bartmann. Our logo was designed by Vanessa Guirey. Sound engineering is done by Chris Bret-Harte. Editing, transcription, and research is done by us, Zoë Crook and Hannah Meister.