

Interviews with three students in the Education Abroad Program

November 24, 1982

"When you see people in a different country who have to spend all their time on basic things - like survival - you discover how many people don't have the time or money to get our kind of education," said Tim England, a University of California, San Diego senior who recently returned from a year of study in France. "I've realized the importance of education, and how it shouldn't be taken for granted."

England is one of approximately 70 UCSD students who last year spent their junior academic year studying overseas under the auspices of the University of California's Education Abroad Program (EAP).

The university-wide program is celebrating its 20th anniversary this fall. Some 659 UC students are currently enrolled in the Education Abroad Program and are spending a full academic year at distinguished universities in 23 countries around the world.

From its beginnings, EAP has been considered a continuation and extension of a UC education, not an interruption for a holiday or a cultural grand tour.

"Our goal has been to maintain geographic diversity within the framework of a regular academic year program for students," said William Allaway, director of the EAP for the University of California. "For our undergraduate and graduate students, this opens incredible academic riches in a wide variety of fields."

Reciprocity has been built in from the start of the program, a feature which this academic year has brought 165 students from nearly 20 countries to UC campuses.

EAP has remained faithful to its original intent, that the cost of study abroad be comparable to what students would pay on a home campus. EAP students pay UC fees, with "extras" limited to their costs for transportation, travel and personal expenses. Students from all UC campuses are eligible to apply, and financial aid is available.

What have been the reactions of UCSD students, such as England, to their year of study in a foreign country?

England, now a senior at UCSD majoring in history and French, spent his EAP year in France at the University of Pau and at the Sorbonne. Christy Carranza, a Spanish literature major, has returned from the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico in Mexico City. Margarita Schneider, also a Spanish literature major, is back on campus after a year in Spain. She took classes at the University of Madrid, Complutense, and the National School of Public Health there.

All three students felt that the citizens and students in their host countries were more politically involved than their American counterparts.

"French culture in general is more politicized," said England. "When you turn on the TV in France, you always see strikes and protests." Nuclear energy, nuclear war, French socialism, and the Reagan administration were the topics of campus discussion, he said.

"Many Spanish students are activists," recalls Schneider. "The students actually went on strike because there wasn't enough classroom space! The Spaniards are very polarized, and it seems as if all the students are either communists or fascists."

French, Mexican and Spanish educational systems are more job-oriented than the American school system, according to these students. According to England, a French child's profession is determined by the age of 14. A French university student, therefore, does not face the same set of quandaries about careers as does an American college student.

In Mexico City, entering college freshmen have decided in which careers they want to be "Certificated," and spend the next four years fulfilling strict requirements for that professional degree.

"We have a good system of higher education in America," said Schneider, "as contrasted to other places in the world where only those with money get to go to school. Many more Americans have a chance to improve themselves."

One of the largest obstacles for American students in foreign countries is dealing with stereotypes.

"Once the French got over their image of the American as being boisterous, obnoxious and outspoken, they came to deal with me as an individual," said England. "On a one-to-one basis, personal relationships had a chance to work," he said.

According to Carranza, it is very hard for American girls to meet Mexican girls. "Mexican guys seem to stereotype American girls as having 'loose morals'," she said. "The Mexican girls felt, unfortunately, that we were competition."

In Spain, Schneider found it equally difficult for American women to be "just friends" with men. Spanish women typically would tell her, "It's not right to go out with a man, by yourself" and "You can't be friends with someone of the opposite sex."

How has this junior year abroad moulded the students' career goals? Tim England wants to be an interpreter, work for the Foreign Service or the Peace Corps, promote cultural affairs, or go into international law. Christy Carranza is convinced that she will make a career working with Latin American countries, possibly as a translator. Margarita Schneider, long interested in medicine, wants to become a bilingual physician and serve a Spanish-speaking community.

Asked what she missed most about UCSD while abroad, Carranza laughed, "The beach, of course! Actually, I didn't miss San Diego as much as I thought I would, because I kept getting letters from home, and because I knew I was being handed a terrific opportunity that I'd probably never get again in my life."

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