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SOUTH AFRICA | SPRING 2007 STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM EVALUATION

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MAJOR1: Neuroscience
MAJOR2: Select second major--
MAJOR3: Select third major--
ABROAD_DURING: Spring 2007

PROGRAM: University of Cape Town, South Africa through interstudy.

COURSE_NAMES: Introduction to Biochemistry Medical Anthropology Industrialisation and Labour in South Africa Xhosa Intensive A

TYPES_OF_COURSES: Regular university courses

EXPLANATION_OF_COURSES:

COMMENTS_ON_COURSE_WORK: Course work was of moderate difficulty, not up to Amherst standards but definitely not sub-par. Everything I heard indicated that UCT is one of the most challenging universities in Africa. The quality of teaching was okay, varying widely between different classes and departments. Class size likewise varied, although most classes were large (about 100) although they were broken up into smaller discussion sections meeting once a week. Grading was different than the American system: the equivalent of a C- starts at 50%, and they go up from there, with an A- being 70%. However, papers were graded taking this scale into account...no paper EVER received more than an 80. Class averages hovered around a B-.

STUDENT_BODY_COMPOSITION: Different depending on the course. Most of my courses had a significant number of Americans (maybe a quarter on average) with the exception of biochemistry, which was nearly all students from various african countries.

COMMENTS_ON_TEACHING: Teaching was not nearly as good as at Amherst. Lectures were sometimes confusing and poorly attended. Lots of material was covered, but without much depth. Teachers were friendly, and most had regular office hours.

ACADEMIC/LANGUAGE_PREPARATION_NEEDED: No academic preparation necessary--UCT offers courses at all levels in a wide variety of subjects. Language preparation is likewise unnecessary; everyone at the university and most people in the community speak English.

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DESCRIPTION_OF_HOUSING_&_MEALS: I was living in a house shared with five other American students in a suburb 10 minutes' walk from campus. We were responsible for all of our own meals.

WHO_MADE_HOUSE/MEAL_ARRANGEMENTS: The program set up our housing for us.

LIVING_COSTS: maybe \$150/month for food...more if you eat out.

MEDICAL_FACILITIES_AVAILABLE?: I never used them, but others said they were fine.

WHAT_PROGRAM_SERVICES_WERE_AVAILABLE?: interstudy gave us an orientation at the beginning of the semester which was very comprehensive. they gave us cell phones and set up bank accounts for us to use.

HOW_DID_YOU_MEET_LOCALS?: I think the best way is through after-school activities, like sports or clubs.

DID_YOU_EXPERIENCE_DISCRIMINATION?: Many people dislike (or say they dislike) Americans, but are generally friendly in conversation and fine once you get to know them. There is a popular trend toward acceptance of gay men and lesbians, but in practice people may encounter discrimination, particularly among the black population.

DID_YOU_TRAVEL?: Yes, i traveled for a few weekends and for fall break. We did have planned excursions, but they were all only day-trips.

WOULD_YOU_RECOMMEND_THIS_PROGRAM/UNIVERSITY?: It depends on what they are looking for. This is not a program that makes it easy to get to know foreign students. Because of the structure of social life at UCT and our housing arrangements, meeting locals takes significant effort. Otherwise, the program is well run and the staff are always available and usually helpful, although you may want to double-check information they give you if it seems suspect. They were always around to assist with any emergencies and do things like negotiate with landlords, etc.

SUMMARY: This experience will certainly make me appreciate my Amherst education, just in terms of class sizes, time with professors, and deeper engagement with issues. Studying abroad has changed my plans for the future--I definitely would like to work abroad now (I wasn't sure before). Social issues are MUCH more raw and on the surface in South Africa than they are in the states, and it is that much easier to connect with the community as a result. I felt much more grounded in this PLACE than I do at Amherst--because of the unique history of the country in the last 13 years, EVERYTHING, in school and outside life, is grounded in the realities of the transition from apartheid. My classes helped me to appreciate the history of the place and the problems of the people in a way I have never before experienced. At amherst, the problems of your immediate surroundings (the Pioneer Valley, Mass, maybe all of New England) are set aside in favor of other pursuits. Abroad--and I don't know if it's only UCT or all of south africa--everyone is focussed on the realities of life in their country. If you're interested in societies, democracy, racism, poverty, HIV/AIDS...South Africa will give you a perspective like nothing else I've ever seen.

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MAJOR1: Political Science
MAJOR2: Select second major--
MAJOR3: Select third major--
ABROAD_DURING: Spring 2007

PROGRAM: Interstudy Study Abroad Program: University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College Campus, in Durban, South Africa

COURSE_NAMES: History 301: Topics in African History Psychology 315: African Psychology Psychology 333: Community Psychology Religion 207: Religion, Migration, and Urbanization

TYPES_OF_COURSES: Regular university courses

EXPLANATION_OF_COURSES:

COMMENTS_ON_COURSE_WORK: Among the four courses I took, the size, quality, and difficulty of classes varied greatly. First off, it should be noted that the University of KwaZulu-Natal uses the British evaluation system, meaning that an examination at the end of the semester is worth at least 50% of the grade in each course. The grading scale was also one that I was certainly not used to: any grade of 80% or above was considered an A+, 75-79 was an A, 70-74 was an A-, and so on. I believe that one was required to score in the upper 50s in order to pass the course, although I'm not sure about the specifics. Although such a grading system may sound easy, the grading was MUCH, MUCH harder. I do not know of a single student in any of my courses who scored above 80% in any class; in fact, another of intelligent and hard-working friends of mine were struggling simply to pass their courses.

I took four classes, and the size of them ranged from about 25 to 75. Some of the courses had the same professor for the entire semester, while others switched off nearly every week in order to give us "expert lecturers" for each unit.

I was abroad during the Spring Semester (although it was considered the Fall Semester in South Africa), and courses began in mid-February, which is much later than at Amherst and later than most other universities across the world. Classes were finished by the end of May, although they were followed by two weeks of exams, so most students could not return home until halfway through June. In between, we were given a full week off for Easter Break, as well as several one-day national holidays, such as Human Rights Day.

SOUTH AFRICA | SPRING 2007 STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM EVALUATION

Lastly, I should point out that each of the courses met up to four times each week, although some of the time slots were only 45 minutes long. The schedule worked in such a way that they would be in the afternoon one day, very early in the morning the next day, etc. As a result, there was no way for students to avoid taking early morning (7:40 AM) classes.

STUDENT_BODY_COMPOSITION: This actually varied as well. In one of my courses (History), approximately half of the students were Americans and Canadians studying abroad. In my three other courses, the class was almost entirely comprised of native Indian and Black students. Surprisingly enough, one of these classes (Religion) was overwhelmingly Indian students while my other two (both Psychology) were predominantly comprised of Black students.

COMMENTS_ON_TEACHING: I found the teaching quality at this University to be disappointing compared with what I had experienced at Amherst. While each of the professors was clearly very knowledgeable about his or her respective subject, they often came across as very pompous and detached. Only in one of my courses did the professor make any effort to get to know the students; the professors were generally under the impression that their job was to lecture, rather than encourage discussion or allow for a diversity of opinions. This made some of the classes incredibly boring, especially when they lasted for an hour and a half.

Each of the professors did have office hours, although they were not always accessible. I did find, however, that the professors were actually much more laid-back and enjoyable when I talked to them outside of class.

ACADEMIC/LANGUAGE_PREPARATION_NEEDED: I actually came to find that relatively little academic preparation was necessary in order to succeed at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. All of the classes were conducted in English, although many of the students spoke Zulu as their native language. Native students around campus conversed in either Zulu or English (or sometimes, a combination of the two), but English alone was sufficient in order to communicate with the other students as well as most people in the country.

I suppose the one piece of advice I would offer to students who are considering the University would be to make sure they can take tests. As noted previously, more than half of the grade in each course was determined by the final examination, whereas most Amherst classes are graded on writing papers. Writing quality at the University of KwaZulu-Natal appeared to make virtually no difference; professors cared much more about whether students knew raw information rather than how they presented their knowledge of it.

DESCRIPTION_OF_HOUSING_&_MEALS: Housing was provided entirely by the Interstudy program, and was pretty much everything I could have asked for. We all lived in the dorms alongside native students, which gave us the opportunity to immerse ourselves in their culture and get to know them very well. I made a number of friends in the residence whom I would not have gotten to know had I been housed with other international students. We were all given single-person rooms, and although my room was not particularly large, I had my own sink (which was a godsend) and a nice view of the city. One of the concerns in the residences was safety: there were numerous reports of theft from people's rooms (although it never happened to me), and it was virtually impossible to leave something in one of the public refrigerators for several days without having it stolen. Meals were not provided by the University, although there were adequate cooking facilities in the residences and several fast food restaurants nearby. Students generally purchased lunch from on-campus vendors and cooked their own food for dinner.

Because there were only three kitchens for the 80-something people in my residence, the kitchen was often quite crowded.

WHO_MADE_HOUSE/MEAL_ARRANGEMENTS: Yes, Interstudy took care of all housing arrangements and there was a liaison on hand to take care of any concerns or problems any of us had.

LIVING_COSTS: Approximately \$50/week for food, and another \$60-\$70/week for activities, clubs, transportation, etc.

MEDICAL_FACILITIES_AVAILABLE?: The answer to that question is debatable. My own personal experience was an adequate one; I needed a refill of my prescription and I was able to get it prescribed by a doctor within a few days. Some of my American friends, however, had an incredibly difficult time arranging appointments with the doctors -- walk-ins were not allowed -- and one or two of them reported receiving the wrong prescriptions after they finally got to meet with the doctors.

WHAT_PROGRAM_SERVICES_WERE_AVAILABLE?: We arrived in Durban nearly three weeks before classes started, which provided us with a great opportunity for us to get to know each other and the city before we began taking courses. Interstudy hosted an orientation for each of its students, took us shopping for basic supplies, and set us up with local bank accounts. There was also a supplementary orientation held for all of the international students studying at the University (approximately 100 in total), which outlined everything one would need to know and also helped us register early for our courses.

Although the international office at the university was pretty lousy and unhelpful, the liaison through Interstudy, Anita Van Soelen, was one of the most caring, kind, and accommodating people I've ever met. We could stop by her office at any time of day with questions about absolutely anything -- ranging from classes to traveling to partying -- and she would help us out. Anita's assistance was a luxury afforded solely to Interstudy students and not those from any other program, and we were very, very lucky to have her.

HOW_DID_YOU_MEET_LOCALS?: While this may certainly sound cliché, my advice to anyone studying abroad in Durban (or anywhere, for that matter) would be to simply jump in. There are thousands of smart, kind, interesting students on campus, and the vast majority of them would love to be friends. Join clubs and simply immerse yourself in the daily lives of the natives. Also make sure to get to know the city. Perhaps my best experience in South Africa was the time I spent volunteering at an orphanage for children whose parents had died of HIV/AIDS. This work gave me the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the deadly disease, and also allowed me to do meaningful work with incredible children.

DID_YOU_EXPERIENCE_DISCRIMINATION?: Although apartheid has been abolished in South Africa for nearly a decade and a half, its legacy in the country is still very present. While there was no outward racism that I experienced or witnessed, it was clear that there is still a great deal of racial tension throughout the country. People still tend to associate with those of their own race, and in a city with three large racial groups -- Whites, Blacks, and Indians -- this provides for quite a bit of segregation. As I said, however, I do not know anyone who outwardly experienced racism or who even felt that were being discriminated against. From a sociological perspective, the racial dynamics of the city were actually quite fascinating.

One other issue I noticed is that there appears to be quite a bit of hostility towards homosexuality in Durban and throughout South Africa. Being gay was generally not as widely accepted, even among those students who were very intelligent and usually empathetic towards others. I talked with some of my South African friends about it, and it appears that there is simply a great deal of misunderstanding about homosexuality there; there is no cohesive, identifiable gay community and it is often viewed as deviant and, in some cases, indicative of some kind of mental disorder or association with witchcraft. I kid you not.

DID_YOU_TRAVEL?: There was one planned three-day long excursion for Interstudy students. I actually was unable to attend it, as I had to fly back to the United States that week, but all of the other students said it was an incredibly enjoyable experience. I did, however, get to take a number of trips during my semester abroad. I visited Cape Town, the Wild Coast, the Drakensburg Mountain Range, Swaziland, Zambia and Malawi, and Hluhluwe game reserve. Each of these trips was a wonderful experience and an incredible opportunity to learn more about and experience more of Sub-Saharan Africa. I would recommend a great deal of traveling to anyone with the financial resources at their disposal; the city of Durban is just one small piece of the incredible continent.

WOULD_YOU_RECOMMEND_THIS_PROGRAM/UNIVERSITY?: I have noted in this evaluation that the academic education I received at the University of KwaZulu-Natal was not a particularly good one, and I was not too pleased with my courses or my professors. That said, however, my experience in the wonderful city of Durban made this semester one which I would highly recommend. Interstudy is an absolutely remarkable study abroad program with a wonderful staff, and I would recommend it to anyone who is interested in studying in South Africa or the United Kingdom. What made my experience in Durban so incredible was simply the diversity it offered, and I mean that in every sense of the word: racially, economically, ideologically, geographically, etc. During my time growing up in Iowa and attending college at Amherst, I had never come to know such a different way of life or way of thinking than what I experience in South Africa. This is not something I can describe in words, nor is it something I believe is unique to Durban, but it is certainly something every student should consider. It was certainly not easy to immerse myself in a culture entirely different than what I had known my whole life, but it was a very rewarding experience. By the way, the beaches in Durban were incredible.

SUMMARY: My study abroad experience this semester is gave me a much greater sense of my place in the world and the remarkable opportunities I have at hand. During my four previous semesters at Amherst, I had become all too familiar with the "Amherst Bubble," and did not have an effective understanding of the world outside of the College. Studying in such a vastly different environment exposed me to a multitude of different viewpoints and opinions. I also met countless people who were economically less fortunate than I have been throughout my life, and I will return to Amherst with a renewed vow not to take anything I have for granted. Although these may appear to be simple lessons, I feel that I have emerged from South Africa with a new outlook on life.