

During the spring semester of 2024, I embarked in a study abroad experience in Toledo, Spain that was life changing in ways I never anticipated. I was motivated to improve my language skills by engaging in the Spanish speaking culture and while learning about international healthcare. As a college student with Hispanic roots, studying abroad in Spain gave me the chance to connect with my cultural heritage while gaining professional experience. Although I was nervous about the challenges I would face while abroad, I knew this opportunity would allow me to grow both personally and academically. I arrived in mid-January with excitement and a bit of anxiety as I wasn't sure how I would adapt to life abroad. However, by the end of my program in May, I had not only improved my Spanish tremendously but also gained a deeper understanding of healthcare and cultural practices in Spain through my academic courses and internship at the National Paraplegic Hospital.

Toledo has deep historical roots and a unique blend of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic influences that make the city feel like a walk through history. Being from Charleston, South Carolina historical aspects are such an integral part of the culture, Toledo already felt like home. In the beginning, I struggled to get used to the typical eating schedules within Spain such as eating lunch at 2 or 3 p.m and the late night dinners at 9 or 10p.m. However, as time went on, I found myself truly embracing these routines and appreciated the slower, more relaxed approach to life that Spaniards are devoted to. The local customs were another aspect that I had to familiarize myself with during my time abroad. However, I quickly found myself indulging in *café con leche* on my walks to school or enjoying a delicious *napolitana de chocolate* as a treat. One of my favorite routines was my bus ride and walk to class as it gave me the opportunity to take in the beauty of Toledo. I would pass by the beautiful landmarks of the Alcázar and the Cathedral and would just be in complete awe to be in such an amazing place.

One of the most significant moments of cultural shock occurred during Semana Santa, or Holy Week, when the city was completely transformed by solemn processions. The intensity of devotion and the level of dedication put into the event was unlike anything I had ever seen before. There were locals and visitors lined up the streets for miles, participating with candles, religious attire, or simply just watching the processions. The streets were filled with music and ginormous floats, some also 300 years old, can be seen to symbolize the religious passion in Spain. This served as a reminder to me of just how powerful tradition and faith are within the Spanish culture itself and it was moments like this that I gained even more of an appreciation for the experience of being surrounded by such a beautiful culture.

A particularly impactful course during my time in Spain was one focused on the country's healthcare system. This course allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the differences in healthcare models between Spain and the United States, especially in terms of accessibility, affordability, and healthcare priorities. It was truly interesting for me to learn about how Spain's universal healthcare system functions and apply this knowledge into my experience at the National Paraplegic Hospital. My internship at the National Paraplegic Hospital in Toledo was truly an extraordinary opportunity that reflected my passion for healthcare. I had the opportunity to work alongside medical professionals dedicated to helping patients with spinal cord injuries in effort for them to regain their independence.

At first, I struggled to understand medical terminology in Spanish and I remember feeling nervous during my first week as I was unsure if I would be able to keep up with the language. Nonetheless, I not only improved my knowledge of medical terminology in Spanish but also communication styles of patient care in Spanish. The opportunity to work in a hospital environment in Spain, truly allowed me to observe healthcare from a global perspective and it is

an experience I will carry with me throughout my future career. One of the key lessons I learned throughout my internship was the importance of cultural competency in healthcare, meaning understanding the importance of social and cultural context behind a patient's care as well as the medical procedures themselves. Furthermore, my internship in Spain taught me that healthcare involves human connection and understanding alongside treatment.

Beyond Spain, my study abroad program granted me the incredible opportunity to explore other cultures in different countries. I was able to travel to France, Morocco, Portugal, Scotland, and Italy, where I was able to reflect on the unique cultural aspects of each destination. These travels not only allowed me to appreciate the unique aspects of each culture but also taught me to value diversity as I was exposed to different traditions and worldviews and becoming more open-minded. While the travel experience was exhilarating, the challenges of navigating different languages, customs, and transportation systems pushed me to become more independent, adaptable, and resilient in my everyday life. These experiences enabled me to step out of my comfort zone and embrace all new opportunities throughout my time abroad.

My time in Toledo, Spain helped me grow in ways I never imagined while allowing me to develop my levels of independence and confidence as well. Being immersed in a different culture, navigating language barriers, and making meaningful connections with people from around the world forced me out of my comfort zone, but in the best possible way. This experience has deeply impacted how I view both myself and my future role in healthcare. It reinforced my desire to pursue a career in public health, with a focus on cultural competency and patient centered care. I also realized how much I enjoy working in diverse environments, which has inspired me to continue seeking opportunities that allow me to connect healthcare and culture. Altogether, I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude as I reflect on my study abroad

experience. Every moment, even the challenges, have shaped me to become more culturally aware and more driven as an individual. My time in Spain will continue to influence my future career and personal life and I will continue to cherish the memories of my journey abroad.