

Eight Questions for Gilman Scholar Rachel Van Tassel



WCU senior Rachel Van Tassel studied in Barcelona this past summer under the auspices of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. She was one of a select group of undergraduates nationwide to receive the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship. The Gilman Scholarship Program broadens the student population that studies and interns abroad by supporting undergraduates who might not otherwise participate due to financial constraints.

Gilman is a dual major in Spanish and French with a dual minor in International Business and Latin American Studies.

Why did you choose West Chester?

I attended Delaware County Community College (DCCC) for a year and a half before transferring to West Chester. I have a very hectic schedule between school and work, and I loved how easy it was to get to DCCC and then head right to work after class. Being from a town nearby, I already was familiar with the town of West Chester, so I knew this would be a painless transition for me.

How did you hear about the Gilman Scholarship?

I knew I wanted to study abroad, but I also knew that I would never be able to afford it on my own. I was browsing the Center for International Programs' website when I discovered the Gilman Scholarship. Paying for college on my own, scholarships always seemed like the best option. As many college students know, when you fill out hundreds of applications with zero luck...it's very discouraging. But the Gilman Scholarship is one of the more specific scholarships, and it seemed perfectly tailored to me, so I figured why not give it a shot. I'm glad I did!

Why did you want to study abroad?

As a foreign language major, I was always told about the importance of study abroad. How else can we immerse ourselves in the language and culture? I was getting to the point where I felt that there was a chunk missing from my language education--something just wasn't bringing it all together. After attempting various other methods of immersion (music, cinema, TV, language exchange) and still feeling incompetent, I knew that I had to study abroad.

Why did you chose Barcelona for your study abroad experience?

Initially, there was a program in Ecuador that I was interested in, but it was cancelled due to low enrollment. Dr. Peter Loedel at the Center for International Programs pointed me towards Dr. Maria Van Liew, as she was conducting another study abroad program, this one in Barcelona. I contacted her immediately. It miraculously worked out perfectly! I got the credits I needed to graduate this December, and I experienced the rich culture of the biggest city in Catalonia.

What did you study and learn in Barcelona?

I took a Spanish Cinema course and an Urban Barcelona course. In addition, I learned all about the history of Catalonia and its relationship with Spain. I visited all of the touristy sites, experienced the nightlife, loved the local restaurants, and comparing cultural tendencies there to those in the U.S.

Did your study abroad experience surprise you in any way, either positively or negatively?

Surprisingly, it was much easier to communicate than I originally thought it would be. I didn't run into any language barrier issues due to my non-authentic accent. This gave me the confidence to use my language skills in real-life situations, without being afraid to make a grammar mistake here and there. Of course, there's always some negatives. One dislike for me was that the restaurant service was extremely slow, but that's just how it works there. Us Americans were all antsy in our seats waiting to get our order in, while the locals were taking their time and just chatting away.

How will you take what you have learned and use these new skills and abilities during the rest of your college career and then in your work life?

This experience will truly help in all aspects of my life. Being a visitor in another country, you really need to put yourself out there and be confident when interacting with locals.

The top lessons I have taken from this study abroad are: keep an open mind and don't make hasty conclusions, be confident in everything (especially foreign language skills), and don't be afraid to make a mistake. Finally, always make an effort to make new friends or just chat with someone -- you never know what you'll learn from them.

What's next after WCU?

Well, I already have a job, so I guess the next step is finding a "real" job! At the moment I am not entirely sure what I would like to do with my degree, but I would like to work with immigrants and refugees, assisting them to assimilate into a new culture and starting a new life here. I am a workaholic though, so I can definitely see myself keeping my current job even if I find a job in my field. I would also love to attend grad school. I am thinking either Social Work or Teaching English as a Second Language.