

Gilman Scholar in Barcelona



WCU Senior Rachel Van Tassel

What is your major?

I am a double major, French and Spanish.

You are a senior, right?

I am technically a “super senior.” I accrued one extra semester due to my double major and double minor, so I will be graduating this Fall 2016!

What's your hometown?

I live very close by, in Garnet Valley, PA.

Why did you choose West Chester?

I attended Delaware County Community College 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?

Since I began my college career, 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, you just give up. Honestly, 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, we are always lectured 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.

Have you studied abroad before this?

This is my first study abroad experience! Actually, I had never been out of the country prior to this trip.

Have you traveled widely?

Does Ocean City, NJ count?

Why Barcelona? *(hey it's a beautiful city, I love it, but I am sure its beauty wasn't the sole reason)*

Initially, there was a program in Ecuador that I was interested in, but it was cancelled due to low enrollment. The director pointed me towards Dr. Maria Van Liew, as she was conducting another study abroad program, but in Barcelona. I contacted her immediately and she sent me all the details. I let her know the credits I needed, and it miraculously worked out perfectly! I am getting the credits I need, and experiencing the rich culture of the biggest city in Catalonia.

What are you studying/doing there?

I am finishing up some credits for my Spanish major. I am taking a Spanish Cinema course and an Urban Barcelona course. In addition, I am learning all about the history of Catalonia and its relationship with Spain. I am visiting all of the touristy sites, experiencing the nightlife, loving the local restaurants and bars, and comparing cultural tendencies here to those of the US.

You there all summer or just part of it?

I'm participating in a 6-week program, June 4th-July 17th.

Affiliated with a university there?

We have two WCU professors here working with IAU College.

How has the experience lived up to your expectations and how has it surprised you, both positively and negatively.

This experience is absolutely priceless. It has definitely lived up to my expectations. Surprisingly, for me, it is much easier to communicate than I originally thought. I haven't run into any language barrier issues due to my non-authentic accent. It really gives you the confidence to use your 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 is the restaurant/dining culture. The service is extremely slow, but that's just how it works here. Us Americans are all antsy in our seats waiting to get our order in, while the locals are taking their time and just chatting away. Now I know what to expect when I walk in a restaurant, but it doesn't mean I like it!

Were you already a night owl? Spain's late night dinners don't bother you?

I'm actually an early bird, but the late night dinners are perfect for me. During the semester, I'm usually in class most of the day and head right to work afterwards, so by the time I get home it's decently late and I'm starving for dinner.

How about the food? What do you like most?

With food it's important to keep an open mind. But if you don't like something, at least you tried! My

least favorite is the ham. I knew it would be a big food staple here, so I tried to put away my previous ham-prejudice and give it a try. I tried many times, and am still not a fan. But my favorite is the Spanish tortilla. It's a thick omelet, almost like a quiche, with egg, potato, and onion. Usually served with slices of bread coated in tomato juice, it's so simple but I find it my go to when I need a snack!

How will this experience be sustainable? How will you take what you have learned and transfer these new skills or new abilities to the rest of your college career and then 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. Otherwise, you'll be walked all over. The locals here are very accustomed to American tourists, so it's a nice surprise to them when you try your hardest to assimilate in the culture. They really appreciate it. The top three lessons I will take from this experience 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, and always make an effort to make new friends or just chat with someone--you never know what you'll learn.

What's next after college? Job, if so in what field? Grad School?

Well, I already have a job, so I guess the next step is finding a "real people" 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 TESL! Other than that, my boyfriend of 4 years and I are about to start house hunting in a few months, so I have that to look forward to as well.

Has Barcelona and this study abroad experience changed you...if so, how?

Very! As a foreign language major, I think most of us like to imagine ourselves as the most culturally sensitive and culturally informed major. But, reading and learning about culture is completely different than experiencing it. If I thought I was informed before, I must be an expert now.

Who would be good to talk to here at WCU about you? Faculty or staff.

Peter Loedel, I am guessing.

Anyone else?

Actually, I've never met Peter Loedel. But, my WCU professors here in Barcelona are Dr. Maria Van Liew and Dr. Daniela Johannes! Also, my French advisor is Dr. Anne-Marie Moscatelli.