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A note on language learning and study abroad.

Ashley Bennett

Six years. That's how long I've been able to utter the words "guten Morgen" and "Tschüß." Time seems to have passed rapidly, and many things have changed since then. There is one thing that remains unchanged, something that I often revisit and fondly reflect on: my ability to speak a second language, German, and the journey I've embarked on to reach this level of fluency.

It was a hot August afternoon. We freshmen scrambled around the gym in hopes of getting into the classes we wanted to take. Inevitably, my indecisiveness had forced me to register last for classes. Few courses remained open for registration; German was one of those courses. I remember thinking to myself, "Hm, German...why not?" and signing up for the course. This was one of the first times studying abroad had ever even crossed my mind; this ended up being one of the most influential and life-changing decisions of my life.

Fortunate enough to have had two years of exceptional language training in the Linfield classrooms with Professors Richardson and Hommel, and outside of it with our Austrian teaching assistant, Heidi, I was ready to put my skills to the test - ready to board the airplane to Frankfurt, on to Vienna, Austria, with eight fellow Linfielders who would become some of my closest friends. Although four long years have passed since my study abroad in Vienna, I will never forget the countless things that I learned about the Austrian culture, European history, living in another country with a host family, the love for classical music, expressionist art and the Austrian dialect, or the great experiences that I had in those four months. Unforgettable, unmatched months that have shaped my future in so many ways. Living in a foreign country taught me the importance of acting as a global citizen, and what an important role communication plays in our lives. I strongly believe that my misunderstandings and miscommunications in the German language have helped teach me to be patient with others and how to deal with resolving conflicts in a diplomatic manner.

When I started taking German courses, I would have never thought of all the doors it could open for me, both personally and professionally. Not only is a study abroad an awesome experience, it is also a fantastic resume builder. During my first semester, on the board outside of the Modern Languages Department offices, I saw a flyer for Fulbright and set a goal for myself: in four years that is going to be my picture hanging outside of this office and I'm going to be in Germany on a Fulbright scholarship. And just that happened. Using the language skills I learned at Linfield and in Vienna, and the international living know-how from my study abroad, I felt prepared to take off on my own to explore a new place. While applying for my work visa and on my first day at the school where I was teaching English I remember feeling so thankful for those skills for they provided me with the perfect base to be independent in a foreign country, an opportunity that I would not have otherwise had. I can't imagine what it would be like *not* to speak German now that it has grown to be such a huge part of who I am.

Sometimes I still dream about riding the tram through the city, in awe of the gorgeous architecture surrounding me, stopping at Schwedenplatz for an ice cream before

walking through the first district of a city I love...my mind wandering through a map of memories.

Studying abroad and learning a language has afforded me with the chance to explore the world, meet new people, and grow in numerous ways. This is an experience that no one should leave college without having; there are a lot of cool and fun things I did during my four years at Linfield, but none that measured up to my semester at the Austro-American Institute in Vienna. The longer the stay, the better. A Jan term travel course is a great alternative but nothing compares to a semester in another country (even if you're in an English-speaking country or program). Allow yourself the chance to fall in love with a place the way I did Austria. I can't imagine you'll regret it.