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## Becoming a Better American through Study Abroad

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Riley Brown

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September 20, 2017

## **Becoming A Better American Through Study Abroad**

In his orientation speech given to the incoming class of students, IAU's president Dr. Karl Jubran perfectly encapsulated the point of studying abroad and pursuing a foreign language.

“You are not here to become French. You're not here to become a self-hating American. You're here to become a better citizen of your home country. Too few Americans today are able to see the world and benefit from the expanded perspective that results from their abroad experience. I don't think anyone can argue that if more young Americans studied abroad the country wouldn't be substantially better off.”

During my first three weeks here in Aix-en-Provence I have tried to view my experiences through the lens of an outsider peering into another culture, not to judge but to learn how and why people carry out their lives in starkly different manners depending on where they live. One could argue that studying abroad is just one big exercise of tolerance; something that is essential to being an American, as we are a country of immigrants.

I find it ironic that by being more “French” I am actually becoming far more American because I am more tolerant now and less quick to judge. In regards to culture, nothing is actually “American”; rather anything “American” is an accumulation of ideas, methods and traditions from our melting pot of a country. One could argue that the reason American goods, music, and culture are so popular throughout the world (I find it virtually impossible to escape American culture in France, especially American music) is because we take the best elements from the other cultures that call America home and combine them.

Therefore, as an American abroad, I feel it is my duty to continue the legacy of multiculturalism that makes America great by learning as much as I can about French culture. For example, why is the food so good here? Why are the bathrooms separated into two different rooms, one containing only the toilet (les toilettes) and the other having the shower and sink (la salle de bain)? Why do the French kiss when they meet (faire la bise)? Does this break the ice of meeting someone better than simply shaking hands? Why do the French work only thirty two hours per week? What can be learned about France's relations with Le Maghreb (North Africa) and its immigrant assimilation problem, a problem that is shared by many European countries currently experiencing an influx of refugees?

Understanding the French people's rationale behind the above described differences is incredibly important to my experience abroad. I can't just passively view the country as a tourist, but instead I must actively engage in the same day-to-day activities as the French people. The French culture, just like all cultures, contains valuable traditions and lessons that can be of great benefit to myself and my country.

For example, I will never look at food or meals the same, thanks to my time in France. The French put impressive amounts of love and effort into their gastronomie, and this results in an incredible dining experience that is unrivaled in America. Once I return to the states, I hope to continue the legacy of the French's appreciation for food. My goal by the time I get home is to gain more such lessons, lessons that will make me a better citizen and make my life more enjoyable. By participating in society back in America with my newfound lessons, I hope to transfer the ideas I have learned in France, allowing those who aren't able to go abroad to experience them as well.

Riley