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Linfield College: Study Abroad in Tunisia, Italy, and Austria

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Dear First-year Students,

How often do you hear someone say about an experience, "It changed my life!?" It's become quite a cliché, has it not? Well, I'm about to use that cliché again, because it is undoubtedly true for my study abroad experiences at Linfield.

I studied abroad twice – once during Jan Term and a second time for a semester in Vienna through my German minor. Each experience was wholly different than the other, but just as formative. For Jan Term, I traveled to Tunisia and Italy, studying ancient Carthage, ancient Rome, Islam, and Catholicism. Less than three years after that trip, the Arab Spring broke out in Tunisia, with the first riots taking place on the street in front of my hotel. World history takes on a much different meaning when it's somewhere you've been, somewhere you've lived. That uprising in the Middle East seriously affected me because of my time in Tunisia. I had stood in front of posters of the soon-to-be-ousted president. I had gazed at his presidential compound from afar, careful not to look directly at it due security requirements. I had traveled in western, rural Tunisia, where I was the first American the kids had ever seen. And I had stood exactly where that street vendor set himself on fire, an event that sparked a turn in world history. Since I had spent time talking with and listening to Tunisians, I understood the world events so much more deeply. We can sit in the comfort of our homes or dorms, watching Brian Williams dictate the nightly news to us about events a world away. Or we can go and experience the world for ourselves. We can understand how the rest of the world lives. We can broaden our perspectives. And we can gain appreciation for what it means to inhabit this big world.

Needless to say, my semester abroad in Austria was completely different. By spending a week in the Austrian Alps to acclimate and adjust, I knew this experience would be unique, yet challenging in its own way. And while Tunisia changed my perspective on the world and enriched my liberal arts education, Vienna impacted the course of my life and my studies. Unlike my Jan Term trip, I was able to stay with a host family in Vienna, learning German, Austrian culture, and enjoying authentic home-cooked Austrian dinners. Because I studied abroad during both the Austrian election and the 2008 US presidential election, living with a host family was a phenomenal experience, granting me the opportunity to gain an insight into the thoughts and lives of Austrians, not only of their own political process, but also of our own. It gives you an entirely new perspective on our political process here in America. I was also fortunate to be able to travel around Europe during the semester, including a school trip to Prague, a week-long vacation to England and Ireland, and weekend excursions to Slovakia and Hungary. This was on top of my class trips to the state opera house, orchestra concerts, and a plethora of trips to churches and museums.

Most of my studies in Vienna were at an institute, at which several other schools and universities also study abroad. One of these schools was BYU, the flagship Mormon university. As a religious studies major, I, of course, made friends with them, which eventually led to me taking a class at their professor's house about the history of Mormonism in German-speaking Europe. Not only did we learn German together, but I, being the only non-Mormon in the class, was able to experience them and their faith in an intimate, personal way. I studied their faith with them, prayed with them, and heard their testimonies. This experience transformed my life and my academic studies. After returning to Linfield, I wrote my undergraduate thesis on an early Mormon. I flew to BYU to visit my

friends the spring after I returned. The Mormon Church became my field of study, and I attended graduate school at Yale University to study Mormonism. And recently I was invited to present a paper at BYU, a paper I dedicated to my BYU study abroad friends because of their lasting impact on me. And yes, I have stayed in contact with most of them, forming life-long friendships. All this was directly caused by my time studying abroad. While Linfield provides a neat bubble in which to study abroad, the experience must be more than that. By branching out from my Linfield study abroad group, you can take the initiative to expand my educational opportunities while abroad. I experienced not only the Austrian culture and German language I was there to study, but also the Mormon culture that I sought out myself.

Study abroad will be what you make it. I'm sure in other letters you'll hear about the opportunities to see new things, the excitement of traveling to new places, and all the fun you'll have. Yet study abroad at Linfield is so much more than living and studying in a different country. Studying abroad is about expanding yourself, challenging your boundaries, and making lasting connections. It's experiencing a different life; it's meeting new friends; it's branching out, expanding your horizons, and transforming your life. Of course it's a blast – my two study abroad trips were my best semesters at Linfield. But it's also so much more. Go, and experience that more.

Matt Davies, '10