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# On the Road: Scholarships Fund Study Abroad

Nov. 18, 2014

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— In New Zealand, Theresa Ward '15 learned to take risks. In Spain, Casey Plach '15 learned to slow down. And in London, Jennifer Sieben '17 gained confidence by living in one of the world's largest cities.

Although their international experiences varied greatly, one element these **study abroad** students have in common is their gratitude to alumna Betty Ritchie-Birrer '47 who provided an endowment to fund **study abroad scholarships**. Twelve IWU students have received the scholarships, making it possible for them to undertake such experiences as hiking across New Zealand or touring the Royal Society of London.



Walled city of York, England (photo by Jennifer Sieben '17)

"I would not have been able to study abroad without this scholarship," said Plach, a **political science** major with a Spanish minor. "Studying abroad was always something I wanted to do, and I am very grateful for the financial support that made my experience possible."

Each student who receives the study abroad scholarship agrees to document and share his or her experiences. Plach created a **Facebook** page chronicling her semester in Granada, Spain. In her postings, she selected a Spanish "word of the day" and explained why she chose that word in context of her experience. One such posting explained *intercambio* (exchange):

"Every (IWU) student gets an 'intercambio' – a Spanish student who we can practice the language with! I met with mine (María) for coffee today and she is really nice. We first spoke in Spanish and then in English so she could practice her speaking skills, too. After meeting with her I realized my Spanish has improved immensely since being here. I don't have to think as much and conversation comes naturally. Maybe María is just being nice, but she told me that I speak very well. Hooray!"

Ward chose to use her **English writing** skills to create a **poetry blog** to document her observations of life in New Zealand and her other experiences abroad. "I was surrounded by an unfamiliar culture with traditions and social norms that were unlike my own, and this was only for six months," said Ward. "I realized families who move to another country are very brave, and I learned not to overlook the efforts they take to assimilate to my culture and my home."

A self-described "Anglophile," Sieben's study abroad diary appears as a **vlog**. Entries cover everyday life (taking the Tube and shopping for her favorite English cookies) along with "pinch-me-so-I-know-I'm-not-dreaming" moments (taking classes inside the National Gallery). A **math** and **physics** double major who hopes to become an astronomer, Sieben said her worldview of astronomy would be narrower without the study abroad experience.



Seville, Spain (photo by Casey Plach '15)

"From trips around London to see The Monument to the Great Fire of London, where Sir Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke tried to make a zenith telescope from the central shaft, to touring the oldest learned society for science, I am learning so much about the history of my chosen field," said Sieben. "Without this scholarship, I would have petitioned my family for loans to study abroad. And if that failed, I would be state-bound."

The benefactor, Ritchie-Birrer, and her husband, Ivan, value the opportunities they have had to travel to other countries. **Research** indicates study abroad positively influences the worldview and self-confidence of students.

Plach agrees. “The world becomes a bigger place when you study abroad,” she said. “You learn that there are many different perspectives on how to live life.”

In her final post on her study abroad Facebook page, Plach reflected on her experience.

“Today I was reminiscing with a friend about our first day in Spain,” she wrote. “We both agreed on the one thing we were most nervous about: asking the taxi driver (in Spanish) to take us from the airport to the hotel. So super lame. We know. It's so funny how far we've come. Since then I've taken many taxis, ordered coffee, given 30-minute presentations, interviewed for a job, taught a woman how to use a computer, and traveled Europe. All in Spanish. Get ready world, Casey Plach might just be bilingual.”