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Students Share Study Abroad Experiences Through Photos

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Illinois Wesleyan University's [study abroad](#) photo contest offers returning study abroad students a chance to visually share their life-altering experiences.

Stacey Shimizu, director of the International Office, said the [contest](#) is much more than a way to share vast collections of beautiful images. "Digital photography and the smartphone have made taking pictures so very easy that students come back from their time abroad with thousands of images," she said. "The contest is valuable because it asks them to sort through that mass of images and to think not just about what is a 'pretty' picture, but to reflect on what the photos capture — how the images represent an experience, a culture, a change in perspective."

Award-winner and Glenview, Ill. native Kaitlyn O'Brien's photo entitled "Sombreros" does just that. In her description of a man selling hats to tourists in the center of San Miguel de Allende, in the Mexican state of Guanajuato, O'Brien '19 writes that "it is easy to disregard [the man] for trying to sell something to the public, but when looking beyond that, it depicts the way he makes a living." A Hispanic studies and secondary education double major, O'Brien's photo won the "Judges' Choice" award.

Shimizu said conducting the contest online via Facebook has yielded unexpected benefits as well. Students receive feedback on their photos and experiences, and students who studied abroad in the past connect with current returnees.



"Sombreros" by Kaitlyn O'Brien '19 was this year's Judges' Choice winner.



"A Small Town in Central Italy" by Jill Bookman '17 won in the "Sense of Place" category.

Other contest [winners](#) include: Jill Bookman '17, an international business major from Golden, Colo., for her photo of Assisi, Italy, in the "Sense of Place" category; Zoe Bouras '18, an international studies and political science double major from Aurora, Ill., for her picture entitled "Moelwyn Mountain Stream" in northern Wales, in both the "People's Choice" and "Road Less Traveled" categories; Cassie Leishman '18, a history and secondary education double major from Lynnwood, Wash., for her untitled photo of a street scene in Italy in the "Humans of the World" category; and Madi Vukich '17 of Lindstrom, Minn., an anthropology and sociology double major, for her photo of the La Recoleta cemetery in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

"For years students have told us that studying abroad is an 'amazing, transformative' experience that teaches them about the larger world, about the U.S., and about themselves," said Shimizu. She said research from the National Society for Experiential Education indicates studying abroad is a high-impact educational activity — akin to undertaking research or participating in an internship that helps students achieve greater levels of deep learning and larger gains in personal development.

About half of Illinois Wesleyan students participate in an international education experience. The University offers opportunities in more than 300 global programs in over 70 countries.

Shimizu noted research from IES Abroad indicated study abroad students found post-graduation employment at much higher rates than non-study abroad students and earned more annually than their peers. "Study abroad is an educational investment, but one that pays off," she said.