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Student Shares Study Abroad Experiences with High Schoolers

June 1, 2017

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Crystal Ocampo-Fernandez '18 spent the first part of her summer break going back to school.

Over two days in May, Ocampo-Fernandez made seven presentations on her semester studying in Russia to nearly 200 students at Argo Community High School, her alma mater, in Summit, Ill. An [International Studies](#) major at Illinois Wesleyan, she spent the fall 2016 semester in St. Petersburg, Russia, thanks in part to the U.S. Department of State's Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program. Gilman Scholars receive up to \$5,000 to apply toward study abroad or internship program costs. The program offers grants for U.S. citizen undergraduate students of limited financial means to pursue academic studies or internships abroad, gaining a better understanding of other cultures, countries, languages and economies — making them better prepared to assume leadership roles within government and the private sector.

Ocampo-Fernandez said her family and her high school advisor, Cynthia Haack, played critical roles in her successful application to college. Ocampo-Fernandez said she wanted to share her insight of the importance of going to college, taking opportunities and studying abroad with students at Argo Community High, where 60 percent of students are low income, according to the Illinois Report Card.



Crystal Ocampo-Fernandez '18



Crystal Ocampo-Fernandez tells Argo Community High School students how the Gilman Scholarship helped finance her semester in Russia.

In each presentation, Ocampo-Fernandez displayed mementos from her trip, showed dozens of photos and shared anecdotes about her IWU experiences, both on campus and in Russia. "I decided to take the leap of going to college but especially studying abroad," she told the students. She spoke of finding support in friends, family and professors in her first years at IWU, and the importance of getting past the 'I'm too proud or scared to ask for help' phase as a first-generation college student. She said Argo students asked meaningful questions, but one especially touched her.

"In one of the honors courses, a very shy, overwhelmed young boy worriedly asked, 'so I don't have to have straight As to get to college?' and I told him that 4.0 GPAs were great, but were absolutely not necessary to go to college and become successful," Ocampo-Fernandez recalled. "I reassured him that when the time came, there were several colleges and universities that would happily offer him a place at their institutions."

At Illinois Wesleyan Ocampo-Fernandez has served as student representative to the University's Curriculum Council; student representative on several search committees; Student Senate Civic Engagement Commissioner; president and secretary of the Spanish and Latino Student Association; student coordinator for the Action Research Center; Residential Community Advisor for Munsell Hall and Residential Assistant for Dodds Hall.

Several Illinois Wesleyan students have received Gilman International Scholarships since its inception more than 15 years ago. International Studies major Ayren Calhoun of Homewood, Ill., is the most recent. She has been awarded the Gilman Scholarship for 2017 and will also study in Russia.

