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Tim Obermiller

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Arrivals and Departures

In their four-month Barcelona experience, students felt the joys and growing pains of living in a proudly different culture.

Story by **TIM OBERMILLER**



Tara Gracer finds artistic inspiration in Zaragoza, a city established by the Romans 2,000 years ago. (Photo by Professor of Art Kevin Strandberg)

As Hillary Anderson '13 spent her final days in Barcelona last spring before returning to the States, she realized she had broken one of her parents' rules. "They told me not to fall in love over here in Europe," she recalled in a paper she wrote about the experience. "I tried not to, but it was impossible not to fall in love."

The object of Anderson's affection was not a person, but Barcelona itself. "Like any relationships, we have our ups and downs, made even more difficult by the different cultures we come from," Anderson wrote. "Barcelona isn't perfect, but nothing ever worth experiencing is."

Anderson was among 18 Illinois Wesleyan students who participated

in the first year of a new study-abroad program hosted by the University this past spring.

As program director, Art Professor Kevin Strandberg led the students through four months of classes and activities designed to familiarize them with Barcelona's "cosmopolitan, international" culture and to guide them from their comfort zones toward new avenues of independence.

Strandberg, who first visited the city in 1985, remains so fascinated with Barcelona that he returns there almost every year. "I think there's something about that area — it's like a creative energy exists in that town and that's really why I love it so much. There are a lot of free thinkers there, and it's very accepting of all cultures."

Located on the Mediterranean Sea, close to the French border, Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia, one of 17 autonomous communities of Spain — "although the Catalans would like to believe it is a separate country," Strandberg says. With a population of more than 1.6 million, Barcelona is Spain's second largest city, after Madrid, and the sixth largest urban area in the European Union. Its mild temperature, stunning beaches and world-class restaurants are part of

what makes the city a huge tourist magnet, but for Strandberg, Barcelona’s biggest draw is its artistic legacy.

“Barcelona has always been the home of the Spanish avant-garde,” says Strandberg, an artist himself who teaches and works in sculpture, glass and photography. Picasso, Miro and Dali are among the artists who spent significant parts of their careers in the Catalan region. Looming large in this legacy— in a very literal sense — is the architecture of Antoni Gaudí. The soaring spires of his unfinished masterpiece, the Sagrada Familia, can be seen “50 miles out to sea,” says Strandberg.

Strandberg arranged for Wesleyan students to tour the Sagrada Familia and other notable Catalan sites, such as the Dali Museum in Figueres, near Barcelona. But they experienced far more than sightseeing during their four-month stay.

Helping to plan those experiences was Illinois Wesleyan alumnus Rich Kurtzman ’98 (also see the sidebar [linked here](#) and at bottom of story). Kurtzman is owner and director of Barcelona SAE (Study Abroad Experience), which partnered with IWU to design the new program.

Kurtzman worked with Strandberg to develop courses taught at SAE’s Barcelona International College that would meet requirements established by IWU’s Curriculum Council.

“These were Illinois Wesleyan courses taught in Barcelona, but with a Catalan slant,” says Strandberg. The students received grades and full credit for their courses.

In addition Kurtzman paired host families in the city with groups of students who lived with those families for the entire spring semester. He also worked out most of the details of the group’s travel itinerary, which included trips to the surrounding Catalan provinces.

Anderson recalled how, during their first weeks in Barcelona, students “were able to see the best side of her. We ate the best food and went to the most beautiful places. ... I got to see the ‘postcard’ version of her.” Gradually, they were pushed beyond the comfort zone of tourists — in part, thanks to a course taught by Strandberg all were required to take.



Travis Otto, Sean Seibring and Parker Carroll in front of Antoni Gaudí’s Casa Batlló, one of Barcelona’s many architectural landmarks. (Photo by Professor of Art Kevin Strandberg)



Among the customs of the annual *correfoc*, Barcelonans dress as devils and light fireworks. (Photo by Professor of Art Kevin Strandberg)

Strandberg says.

“I planned smaller excursions,” says Kurtzman, “so I’d take them to neighborhoods that I knew they probably wouldn’t see otherwise, and then they might go back afterward on their own. My goal is for students to see the real Barcelona, the authentic Barcelona.”

It’s often these small excursions that provide the biggest opportunities for growth, he adds. “The study-abroad experience isn’t about us doing everything for the students; it’s about them growing and becoming more self-sufficient,” Kurtzman says. “Some of the group’s parents came over to visit and couldn’t believe how much more independent and confident their children were after a couple of months.”

In her final paper, Anderson recalled how, after a few weeks in Barcelona, she felt confident enough to navigate the streets on her own. She boarded a city bus, expecting that it would eventually return to her point of origin, “just like in the U.S.,” she wrote. “After 20 minutes, the bus stopped. The bus driver looked back at me. ‘*El fin.*’ The end. I had no clue where I was or how to get home. Two hours later, I got home, exhausted and frustrated with Barcelona for the first time.”

Another source of frustration was language. There was no language requirement to enroll in the Barcelona program, but several students knew at least some Spanish. The problem was that, throughout the region, “Catalan is the official language, and it’s used even more now than it used to be,” says Strandberg. With origins dating back to Catalonia’s status as a province of the Roman empire, the language today expresses a fierce desire for independence.

“Urban Photography” was an expanded version of a popular May Term course Strandberg has taught four times in Barcelona. Structured in three parts, students first photograph the city “as visitors, from the outside looking in,” he explains. Next, as they get to know the city’s neighborhoods and their home families, they are asked to capture images of those people and places. Finally, they bring their Barcelona experience full circle as they take the perspective of “an insider and seek out popular attractions to take photos of tourists who had just hit town.”

The course, as well as Kurtzman’s itinerary, was designed “to get them to know all the different parts of the city,”

After the Spanish Civil War, Gen. Francisco Franco brutally suppressed any activities associated with Catalan nationalism, Strandberg explains. Since Franco's death and the rise of Catalonia as an economic and cultural power, the assertion of independence from Spanish authority can be seen everywhere in Barcelona — from holiday parades and huge graffiti murals to the fierce rivalry between the city's soccer team, Barça, and Madrid's professional club.

Along with its independent spirit, students became acquainted with other aspects of the Catalan character. “In Spain, my lifestyle got turned upside down,” wrote Kelsie Gleason '12 in her final paper, in which Strandberg asked students to compare American and Catalan cultures. “The people here walk slowly, eat slowly and drink slowly. They take their time in cafes and don't take food or coffee to go. They don't completely disregard deadlines, but don't have the same urgency to be on time for everything that we do at home.”

The lack of urgency was sometimes a source of frustration for students — convenience stores, for example, typically kept hours more convenient to the owner than the shopper. Gleason, for one, learned to appreciate the more laid-back approach. “I have discovered how refreshing it is to just pause for a half hour and drink a *café con leche* with a friend, to people-watch on a park bench or to stroll around different neighborhoods without a destination in mind. ... It is a much happier, much more realistic and much less stressful way of life, and we could definitely learn a thing or two from the Spaniards in this department.”

Those kind of small epiphanies are what Illinois Wesleyan's Spain Program in Barcelona is all about, says Strandberg. “Seeing the students develop a familiarity with the new and strange geography, culture and cuisine is really pretty exciting,” he says. “I remember again how I felt when I first had that same experience.”

Students are already signed up for that experience this upcoming spring term. Carolyn Nadeau, chair and professor of Hispanic Studies, will lead the 2012 program as director. Strandberg himself will return to Barcelona this spring to teach his May Term course.

If those students are anything like Anderson, they will notice the changes that an international experience can bring. After spending a few months in Barcelona, Anderson observed how “I



Students compiled photo portfolios of their stay. One of Emily Schmidt's pictures showed the Catalan custom of building human towers called *castells*.

blended in so much that Spanish people asked me for directions. I walked down the street with a new confidence in myself. I feel that anything life throws me, I will be able to handle.”

One thing Anderson did struggle to cope with was the thought of leaving the city she had grown to love. “She has become a part of me, and I hope that I have become a part of her. She has changed me forever, and I can only hope that I had the smallest, most insignificant effect on her.

“All I know is that I will return to her, someday, somehow. That I promise to her and myself.”