Study Abroad Report for Henry-Mitchell Scholarship

My African Adventure

My name is Daniel Pliske and I am a junior in economics at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC). During fall semester 2007, I studied abroad at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Bellville, Cape Town, South Africa. This was one of the most challenging, yet best experiences of my life.

I took advantage of the opportunity to study in South Africa because of my interest in Africa’s varying economies and cultures, my passion for travel, and my desire to work in Africa after completing my bachelor’s degree. I had already traveled to 17 countries, on four different continents, and Africa was definitely on my list of places to go and this study abroad opportunity allowed me to do so. Participating in the Study Abroad Program, as a Henry Mitchell Scholar gave me the chance to live on another continent and immerse myself in a totally different culture, why working on my bachelor’s degree. While in South Africa, I was able to do several things. I took courses in economics and African history, learned an extraordinary amount about their history and culture, traveled around the country and to four other countries as well, became very familiar with Cape Town, met many interesting people from all over the world and developed life-long friendships, learned how to surf and drive on the left side of the road, and much more.
Upon arriving in Cape Town, South Africa on July 7, 2007, I was greeted warmly by representatives of UWC. I was accommodated at a guest house for a few days and then placed in residential housing at UWC, where I planned on living for the entire semester. The dorms were much different than what I was familiar with and I did not enjoy my experience while I was there for a few nights. The campus is quite isolated and the area surrounding it can be very dangerous as well. Unless you have a car on campus, then it is quite difficult to go into the city on a regular basis. Also, when I stayed on campus, I was the only student and this made it very difficult for me to settle in. Instead of living on campus, out in the suburb of Bellville, where the university is located, I decided to live in the city in a neighborhood called Observatory. I leased a house for five months with 13 other international students, three Norwegian guys and one German woman who were also studying at UWC plus ten other European and American women, who were all studying at the University of Cape Town (UCT). This was by far the largest amount of people that I had ever lived before, but I got along well with all of them and learned an extraordinary amount from them and the experience in general.

One of my biggest challenges was transportation. I loved living in Cape Town, but my house was quite a ways from the university. Sometimes I was able to catch rides with my Norwegian roommates who had a car and it would take 20 to 30 minutes depending on traffic, but about half the time I had to take public transportation. I would ride the Minibus taxis and/or the city buses from the university, to a neighborhood called Mobray and then walk home from there. When relying completely on public transportation and my own two feet, the commute would take one to one and a half hours.
each way. The transportation issue was definitely a bit of a pain but living in Cape Town was a great learning experience, very inexpensive, a great way to assimilate into everyday life in Cape Town, and well worth it because I loved living in the city, rather than way out by the airport where UWC is located.

At the beginning of my stay, I experienced the most amount of culture shock that I ever had before, out of all the other countries that I had been to. This was primarily due to being in a minority group while living in a foreign country. The city of Cape Town is very diverse, but on public transportation and in certain areas, I stuck out like a sore thumb. South African demographics are much different from the U.S., where Coloured people account for 48.13% of the population, followed by Black Africans at 31%, Whites at 18.75%, and Asians at 1.43%; according to wikipedia. Being a minority definitely took some getting used to, but it was a great learning experience for me.

While attending UWC, I took International Economics, Macroeconomic Analysis, a humanities course, where I studied ancient western African history, and Africa after transition, where I studied African nations that have fairly recently fought off colonialism and are now independent nations. UWC is very different from UMKC and probably all other American universities, as far as grading, class structure, teaching methods, and the campus itself. I experienced many challenges in my studies, primarily in my economic courses because they were beyond my level of economic understanding and they were very difficult and poorly organized. All my courses were held in large lecture halls, where attendance was not taken and I had to attend tutorials for two of my courses, where attendance was taken. It was sometimes hard to understand the professors because of
their accents. Also, students would often talk during classes, which made it difficult to hear the lectures.

When not in the classroom, I also spent a lot of time on the campus. This allowed me to learn a lot about the campus, interact with the other students and faculty members, study in the library, have lunch, and even swim in the Olympic-size pool. I was usually one of few, if not the only white student in my lecture classes of about 75 to 150 students, which was a lot different than I was accustomed to. This was an amazing change of university environments for me and gave me the opportunity to meet students from very different backgrounds, which is quite different from attending college in Kansas City. Overall, I enjoyed my time spent at UWC very much and learned a great amount about the structure of South African universities and the vast differences between higher education over there compared to that of the U.S. However, I believe that I did not learn as much in my economics courses as I should have, would I have taken them at UMKC. It was a great experience, though, to study African history while I was actually in Africa and I got quite a lot out of those courses.

The cultural education and experience that I received first-hand, by actually living in a foreign country was probably the best overall learning experience from my time spent in Africa. Cape Town is a very diverse, beautiful, and amazing city that has something to offer for anyone.

One of the major things I noticed was the extreme poverty in South Africa. I had learned before leaving the U.S. that South Africa currently has about a 40%
unemployment rate, therefore, there is quite a bit of poverty. I was prepared for this when I went there and I managed to avoid any major problems while I was there. Because of South Africa’s poverty problem, a large population of greater Cape Town lives in shacks in what are called Townships, located in the Cape Flats. There are a large number of homeless people in Cape Town and people slept on the streets by my house and sometimes even on our porch. A few of my friends were mugged in Cape Town and in other Southern African countries. While living in a third-world environment, even if it is in a modernized city, I adapted very well and I was always very aware and precautious of my surroundings.

While school was not in session, I was able to travel around the Western Cape (the province in which Cape Town is located), to Johannesburg and also to Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. The highlights of my travels in Africa include: the tropical beaches of Mozambique, Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, the Okavango Delta (the largest inland delta in the world) in Botswana, the Namib Desert in Namibia, and all of the wildlife in the various national parks that I drove through. My travels were an amazing learning experience because of the major cultural differences amongst African nations and the fact that they were all so different from one another, but all had wonderful things to offer. It was great to be out of the city and go to the rural parts and see how the majority of people in Africa live.

My time spent in Africa and the experiences in which I got out of the trip was well worth it and was definitely the best time of my life. I learned a great deal from attending UWC and living and traveling in Cape Town, South Africa, and Southern
Africa. I am proud of how well I was able to adapt to the new culture and environment. I am also quite happy with the number and quality of the new friends I made. Most importantly, I learned a lot about myself and about what I want to do for a career. Before I went to South Africa, I already knew that I most likely wanted to join the Peace Corps after I graduate from UMKC. This experience reinforced that idea and made me decide that I would like to work somewhere in Africa doing economic and community development. After having traveled to Africa, I am eager to travel around the world even more and work abroad as well.