Throughout my undergraduate studies I arduously desired to afford the opportunity to study abroad in some interesting locale. Having never left the country, it was something of a dream. A dream that was achieved when I was accepted as a Henry Mitchell scholar to study at the University of the Western Cape in Belleville, South Africa. The experience was enriching beyond my wildest expectations, and quite possibly the greatest of my life.

The decision to study at UWC was an easy one to make. Located in a beautiful city, in an interesting country, in an under explored (at least from an American perspective) part of the world, UWC is really ideal for a unique study abroad experience. The favorable exchange rate is also a major plus. From a financial perspective South Africa is much more economical than other study abroad locales, making travel and other enriching activities much more feasible for the average student (although “touristy” activities, geared towards European and American travelers, can be quite expensive). In fact the most expensive part of my experience was the airfare.

I found the University of Western Cape to be fairly similar in structure and style to any American institution of higher learning. Class instruction and assignments were basically identical, and I had little trouble adapting to their requirements. Instructors were clear about their aims and easy to understand (I was somewhat concerned about the accents). The office of International Relations, and in particular Debra Lamson, were exceptional in helping me to adjust to a new environment and make the most of my time at UWC.

Staying in a residence hall on campus gave me the opportunity to interact with more local students, as I was not particularly interested in spending my time in South
Africa with Americans and Europeans in Observatory. The accommodations were actually quite nice once I went shopping to get some things make it feel more my own. Also, I was able to acquire a refrigerator and stove with the help of Ms. Lamson, so I essentially had a kitchen in my room. This not only made my stay more affordable but enjoyable as well.

The only issues I had with the university was the abysmal state of the administration. Registration was an all day affair, even though I received special treatment as an exchange student. When I encountered issues it was not uncommon to stand in line for hours only to be told to go to a different office, only to have that office tell me they could not help me. There seemed to be almost no cooperation or communication between different departments, and for no particular reason. Just getting graded papers back became a major issue. While it seems as though there are attempts at fixing these problems, most students and employees of the university seem to just accept these inadequacies as the way things are.

Overall my time in South Africa and at UWC was well spent and well worth the effort it took to make it all happen. Special thanks to Professor Uphoff for accepting me into the program and to Ms. Lamson for all her assistance upon my arrival.

Joel Downer