**Study Abroad: Parent and Student Perspectives**



Making friends with the wildlife

How do parents and students discuss and evaluate the pros and cons of study abroad? What’s the best way to get the conversation going?

We asked MIT Parent Connector Caridad Martinez and her daughter Veronica (Course 16, ’17) to candidly share their respective viewpoints. Veronica spent the spring semester of her junior year studying in South Africa with the MIT-University of Pretoria exchange program.

Caridad Martinez, MIT Parent Connector and Veronica's Mother

**When did you first discuss studying abroad with Veronica?**

Veronica and I discussed the opportunities available for study abroad when she was applying to college during her senior year of high school.

**Were you in favor of the idea from the beginning or did you need convincing?**

I was a proponent for study abroad programs before Veronica even applied to the program at MIT. My concerns were not about the value of a study abroad program. My sister had studied abroad in Spain and I had lived abroad when I was around Veronica’s age so I knew exactly how much being abroad benefited our family and my point of view as a parent. As such, MIT’s numerous study abroad programs and how supportive and encouraging the institution is regarding study abroad was something we saw as a big benefit when she chose to attend MIT.

Veronica was selected for a program over Spring Break during her freshman year which took her to South Africa. That helped my comfort level with the semester-long program since she had already been to that area and met others from the engineering departments there. No additional convincing was necessary.

**What concerns did you have?**

I had three concerns:

First, I was worried about the cost.  At many schools, there is an additional cost associated with study abroad programs that is above and beyond the cost of attendance at their home institution. Once we saw how supportive MIT is of study abroad opportunities and how financial aid still applied, I was not just relieved, but excited for the opportunity Veronica had before her.

Second, I was concerned about her security as a young woman across the ocean in a foreign country. I’m a bit of a worry wart in that regard. (I can’t help that). My concern was that it takes more than a full day to get to South Africa from the US and the cost is very high. I was concerned that if something serious were to happen, I couldn’t afford to get there to help in a timely fashion and that she had no family near her to provide support.

Finally, I was concerned the schooling wouldn’t be as rigorous at another institution and that her credits may not transfer back to MIT. I didn’t want her incur the cost of an additional semester of school if it could be avoided or to fall off track with her program at MIT.

**Were you worried that Veronica may miss out on MIT opportunities by going abroad?**

I wouldn’t say I was worried, but I did have some concerns that she would miss out on leadership opportunities and peer activities within her MIT clubs or that she would have trouble securing a summer internship while abroad. Thankfully, she secured her internship before she left to South Africa.

**What assistance or advice did you give Veronica while she was abroad?**

I couldn’t assist much physically or financially, so advice is what I could give:

* See as much as you absolutely can. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity!
* Enjoy the opportunity to make friends from different corners of the globe.
* Travel in groups and keep your wits about you, and use common sense. Don’t blindly trust while traveling.
* Learn as much as you can about the new culture, and try to explore and experience everything you can about living as a local.
* Do your best to get credit for the classes you take abroad.
* Communicate proof of life to your parents more than sporadically. A little text goes a long way to making your mom (and dad) feel comfortable you’re living on the other side of the world.

**How do you think studying abroad has benefited Veronica?**

Veronica has always been easy-going when it comes to meeting other people, so naturally she forged friendships with fellow international students as well as local students.  Study abroad provided her an opportunity to learn about the local culture and explore beyond her campus in South Africa. She traveled to neighboring countries including a trip to the tallest waterfall in the world, Victoria Falls.

Not only did she have an opportunity to learn about the culture and history of South Africa, she took in the cultures of the other international students from countries such as Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands. In turn, she shared her unique experience as an American of Hispanic descent who grew up in a predominantly Spanish-speaking area.  Her American experience was even unique compared to the other MIT student who was part of the same study abroad opportunity.

Being able to share these experiences helps build a greater understanding of other people and cultures. It builds bridges not only of understanding but of curiosity which allow people to think more openly. I feel her experiences studying abroad have broadened her mind, piqued her curiosity about the world, allowed her to learn additional language skills, and further strengthened her ability to work effectively as part of a diverse team.

**What do you know now about Veronica’s study abroad experience that you wish you had known before?**

I wish I would have remembered how spotty internet service can be overseas.  We relied on apps that required internet service for our communication (iMessage and WhatsApp).

I now also know what an astute, adventurous, capable, and independent young person my daughter has become. I always knew she was capable of it, but taking away the safety net of a school in the same country where phone calls and messages are a presumed luxury, allowed her to prove to me time and again how well she can manage through organizing adventures abroad with her housemates and fellow international students while simultaneously juggling her academic responsibilities.

**What advice would you give other parents about study abroad?**

RELAX. It may be the other side of the world, but it’s not the end of it. Don’t just support but actively encourage your son or daughter to study abroad. Regardless of the location, duration, or program, it is a life-changing, character building, eye-opening opportunity.  MIT provides such a wonderful office that supports and assists our students throughout the process from questions about their application to requisite vaccinations before the trip.

Understand they cannot always communicate as frequently as they would stateside. Internet can be spotty and cell service is expensive.

One more thing … If they are gone for the summer or a whole semester, don’t hesitate to buy a ticket to visit your student at their home away from home. I’m not joking! My only regret about her study abroad experience is that I didn’t visit her myself while she was in South Africa for a tour from her perspective.

**Veronica, Course 16 Senior**

**When did you first consider studying abroad?**

I always knew I wanted to have some kind of abroad experience while in college, but wasn’t sure about the location or duration. When I got to MIT, I saw that we had MISTI opportunities for research and teaching either during IAP or during the summer. These are incredible programs and options, but I wanted to have internships in my field (Course 16 - AeroAstro) that could lead to future jobs after graduation, so I decided not to go with MISTI. I also took classes during most of my IAP terms, which didn’t leave time for MISTI programs in my schedule, unfortunately.

Since I already knew I wanted to go abroad, I was on the lookout for any opportunity that was offered. I received an email through the department about a Spring Break trip to Pretoria, South Africa, for Course 2 and 16. This was an introduction to the MIT-Pretoria exchange program since at that point no one had yet gone from MIT to South Africa for the semester. I applied thinking it would be unlikely for me to be accepted since I was a freshman and mostly sophomores were applying. However, once I was accepted and ultimately went to Pretoria for Spring Break of 2014, I knew I definitely wanted to apply to study abroad there for a semester during my junior year.

**What made you interested in this specific program (University of Pretoria Exchange)?**

The two options I was offered through previously set up exchange programs for Course 16 were University of Pretoria in South Africa for one semester and the MIT-Cambridge exchange program for one year. Since the Course 16 requirements include several classes that should be taken at MIT, I knew it would be better for me to only be abroad for a semester at most. My participation in the MIT-Pretoria Spring Break program had introduced me to the beautiful country of South Africa and the University of Pretoria. South Africa is also a very unique country that I probably would not have the opportunity to spend much time in otherwise, unlike any European country. With all this in mind, I knew that the MIT-Pretoria exchange program would be an incredible program for me.

**Were your parents supportive? What questions did they ask?**

My parents and I discussed whether studying abroad would keep me on course with my expected graduation date and the impact it could cause on future classes if I were away for too long. However, they were very encouraging and just wanted to make sure I kept these things in mind while I was selecting courses to take abroad.

My parents were extremely supportive throughout the entire process since they have experience living abroad through the Army and business trips. My dad had been to South Africa previously for business and was very excited that I was going there since Cape Town is his favorite city, so he definitely supported my decision to go. I also have traveled around the US and to several other countries without my parents so they knew I could stay safe and aware when traveling.

One large part of our discussions concerned the cost of studying abroad. However, since tuition would be paid to MIT for the semester and housing would be paid to the University of Pretoria while the exchange rate was greatly in my favor, it ended up being cheaper to live there with flights taken into account.

My parents were somewhat nervous about the trips they knew I would want to take within South Africa, but were comforted by the fact that I had a friend from MIT joining me for the semester and that I have a strong understanding of how to adapt to a foreign country’s culture to keep myself from looking like a tourist. So, overall I was very lucky that my parents were supportive and open to helping me with any issues that could possibly arise while traveling.

**What surprised you the most or challenged your assumptions while studying abroad?**

Since I had participated in the MIT-Pretoria Spring Break program, I wasn’t very surprised with the country itself. I had already been on a safari, seen the university, and met some of the students. However, I think the thing that surprised me most was the living arrangements. I had assumed that we would be living in the on-campus residence buildings with other University of Pretoria undergraduate students and would become friends with many South Africans, allowing me to learn some Afrikaans and be enveloped in the South African culture. However, that was not how things turned out when we got there.

After some initial confusion regarding housing, we ended up living with other international exchange students in a very nice residence, which was occupied mainly by graduate students. Since all of us exchange students lived together, we became very close friends very quickly and traveled around the country and Southern Africa together. I gained many new friends from Germany, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Mexico, China, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, and Luxembourg, but only a handful from South Africa. This wasn’t a negative surprise since I learned about so many cultures other than South African while there and made lifelong friends, but it was unexpected.

**How did the academic culture you experienced abroad differ from MIT?**

Compared with MIT, there was less of a fast-paced “work and study” culture and more of a relaxed “leave time for fun” culture. It was a nice surprise because it made the semester less stressful than I was used to. There was also less of a collaborative environment when it came to homework and studying compared to what we have here at MIT. This was also a positive surprise because it taught me to be more of an independent student and forced me to focus on my own and go to the library to do my work since most of the friends I made were humanities students with very different courses.

**What life skills do you think you gained from your study abroad experience that may help you in your future career?**

I definitely enhanced my skills in seeing things from others’ perspectives. This is mainly due to the fact that I lived with more than forty students whose first language was something other than English. I had to make sure that I spoke more clearly so that everyone could understand what I was saying, which definitely will be helpful in the future when I have to speak to clients from outside the US.

I do think that the biggest simple skill I learned, or maybe re-learned, was how to become less dependent on technology. Since I didn’t have very good Wi-Fi or phone data to use my phone all the time as I would here in the US, I spent more quality time face to face with friends talking, cooking on the “braai,” sharing stories, and exploring. It taught me to live more in the moment and made me realize how the non-stop distraction of my phone does sometimes get in the way of that.

**What advice would you give other students for talking to their parents about studying abroad?**

First, try to see things from your parents’ perspective, including the concerns they may have about your being far away with possibly limited contact. Definitely figure out early on how you will maintain contact with them to assure them that they will be easily reached if there are any issues. Remind them that MIT has many resources in many countries for emergency contacts to call if something arises while you are there.

Also, let them know how important this is to you and what you can learn/do while there. Parents ultimately want the best for their children so explaining these things can help them see that study abroad can definitely be a very positive influence on your future.

There are incredible life skills gained from living outside of the US even for a short while. Learning the cultures of other countries, trying unfamiliar foods, seeing very different living conditions than we’re used to, and just learning about anything new that we don’t necessarily see here can be extremely valuable. You’ll become more open-minded and aware of other perspectives. These skills are very useful in the real world and can make you much more prepared to confidently face unfamiliar situations you may experience in the future.

<https://gecd.mit.edu/study-abroad-parent-and-student-perspectives>

From the MIT web page about study abroad on their Global Education & Career Development site

Note: the original article had more photos. I just kept the first one and added a caption from one of the others.