

Essay by Brendan Morrell, Foundation for Asia Pacific Education Scholarship

Recipient

When I first decided to do a summer study abroad program, I was just getting out of High School. I had recently been accepted to the University of Pittsburgh, which I had applied to in part because of a specific program they offered. The program was called the Mongolia Field Studies Program, and involved spending a summer living and traveling in and around Mongolia. I knew very little about Mongolia at the time, and had never heard of a program that involved studying there, so I was very excited about the prospect of spending time in such an unfamiliar place. As a Chinese major, I was pleasantly surprised by the fact that a large portion of the trip was spent in both China and Russia, for the purpose of acquiring a broader and more complete context, in which to study and learn about Mongolia. I had initially been interested in this specific program purely because it sounded unique and fulfilled some of my general education requirements. This news made the trip far more important in terms of my own academic and career goals.

The most noticeable effect this trip had on my own goals was its impact on my plans involving Chinese. I have planned on going into international law, specifically dealing with China. In order to do this, it is incredibly beneficial to be able to speak Chinese. Unfortunately, after two years of Chinese, in which I had a difficult time gauging my progress, my interest in further study was waning, and I had started considering other types of law, which wouldn't require an additional spoken language, as I had decided to at least postpone further language study.

Going on this trip completely changed my feelings on this issue. Although I still found it fairly difficult to communicate with native Chinese speakers, actually going to

the country and being able to get my point across in an entirely different language renewed my interest in its study.

Aside from such obvious career related effects, my study abroad experience definitely taught me a lot about different cultures and ways of life. I was amazed to see the different lifestyles the people in each different country lived. Although it is impossible to describe all of the ways my experiences affected me in so short a space, I will attempt to give an idea of their profound effect by focusing on a few of the many experiences I had. Mongolia in particular greatly changed the way I view the world. It specifically gave me an appreciation for how unnecessarily complicated some things we do in the U.S. are. At the beginning of the trip I was constantly seeing things that I had always assumed unsafe, impractical or impossible. Over the next two months though, I began to see that a much of my thoughts and concerns were mistaken. A few of the most salient memories of mine involve these types of thoughts. I remember arriving in Mongolia, and finding out that they had almost no taxis in the city. People would just stick their hand out, and a random vehicle would pick the person up and take them where they requested on the way to the driver's destination. After the initial discomfort and apprehension for this process wore off, I realized it was actually a far better system: not only did this cause the fare to be incredibly cheap (typically between one and two USD), but also hailing a cab was also nearly instant anywhere there was a road because every car doubled as a taxi. Because of this, during my research, I was able to ride nearly 6 hours back to the capital city from a rural village, simply by stopping a car, and asking if I could get a ride if I paid ten USD and covered the gas one-way. The man I asked, picked his family up, and made it into a cheap family vacation to the capital.

This kind of flexibility and resourcefulness, which I noticed everywhere, gave me a greater appreciation for what's possible. I feel much more prepared for most situations after seeing how simply even fairly significant obstacles can be overcome when people are willing to roll with the punches and put in a little extra effort. Above and beyond that, I came to realize how overcautious people in the U.S. tend to be. I was shocked at how few safety regulations Mongolia has in terms of automobiles, housing, food, construction, and practically anything you can think of. Despite this, when I looked into it, all of the problems I had expected to find (vehicle damage, injuries, sickness,) were pretty similar to the U.S. This taught me to be a lot more adaptive and relaxed about a lot of things I used to think of as extremely dangerous or problematic.

Overall, the trip was incredibly interesting and beneficial. I learned a lot about the world, while improving and developing skills, which will aid me in almost anything I do. Aside from becoming more culturally aware, the most beneficial thing I learned over the summer was how to independently problem solve, and adapt to different situations in order to quickly find a solution. In addition to this, the trip had a very palpable benefit to my life, in that it improved and renewed my interest in China, and helped me make the decision to continue learning the language, which will allow me to pursue my chosen career.

This trip was not only incredibly enjoyable and educational in terms of cultural awareness, but also very beneficial to my academic life and career path. I doubt I would have been able to participate in it if not for the generous scholarship I received from the Foundation for Asia Pacific Education. For this I would like to thank you.

Brendan Morrell