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Ready for the World Meets Undergraduate Research

By Jenny Bledsoe

In recent years, two University of Tennessee initiatives have worked to expand undergraduate students' horizons globally and scholastically. The goal of the Ready for the World initiative is to "help students gain the international and intercultural knowledge they need to succeed in today's world," according to the UT website. With its Office of Undergraduate Research, based in the larger Office of Research, the University of Tennessee is working to centralize research opportunities on campus and to connect ambitious undergraduate students with faculty members interested in mentoring young researchers.

Occasionally, these two initiatives meet when undergraduate students complete research abroad. By profiling two students who fit within this small sub-category of undergraduate researchers, we hope to share a glimpse of the numerous possibilities available, as well as the excitements and challenges of doing research abroad.

Ashley Batts, senior in English Literature and Women's Studies, completed research in Bangalore, Karnataka, India, during Summer 2010, while Elisabeth Tilstra, senior in Global Studies and Spanish, is doing research during the Spring 2011 semester in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Ashley's faculty advisors are Drs. Cheryl Travis and Rebecca Klenk in Women's Studies. Ashley's research "focused on the programs of a specific Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in Bangalore, Karnataka, India, and questioned if its policies were influenced by globalization politics and economic liberalization discourse, and if that created positive or negative experiences for Indian women (both middle class and low class women)," she explained.

Ashley volunteered with the NGO The Centre for Social Action, completing multiple programs, including a "Village Immersion Program," during which she spent one weekend in a rural village in order to "learn about everyday life in rural India." Ashley also completed interviews with three people who worked for the NGO, with a group of women from a rural village, and with a university professor. Ashley planned her research in order to gain "a diversity of perspectives" on her topic of research.

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Doing research for the first time is a challenge for any undergraduate student, and adding the dimension of language unfamiliarity can make that research an even greater challenge.

Ashley detailed the challenges she experienced doing research in India, "I was nervous carrying out research abroad, especially since my topic could have mixed responses, but everyone was really helpful and wanted me to understand their perspectives and views. For me, the most difficult part was finding diverse perspectives while facing a considerable language barrier. I was able to get the interviews I needed from middle class, educated Indians, but it was much more difficult finding translators in order to conduct interviews with lower class, uneducated Indians."

When asked how she learned of the possibility of doing research abroad and why she decided to act on that opportunity, Ashley explained how multiple interests coalesced into the completion of her research project: "I knew that I wanted to study abroad, and also that an independent study project was a part of the Women's Studies major requirements, so I wanted to combine the two aspects into one trip. I talked to my academic advisors, the study abroad office and the Chancellor's Honors Program about the possibility of researching abroad, and it was actually easier than I expected to arrange all of the plans," she said.

As Ashley's experience shows, people and departments across campus are eager to help interested undergraduates make their goals a reality. Ashley received grants from the Chancellor's Honors Program, which financially facilitated her research abroad.

Preparing to begin her research abroad, Elisabeth offers a different perspective on her coming experience. Elisabeth has worked primarily with Dr. Jon Shefner and has received input from Drs. Michael Handelsman, Tricia Redeker Hepner, and Jana Morgan.

Elisabeth has been preparing her trip for over a year and was encouraged by faculty members to complete this project. "This project has really been a work in progress. I studied abroad in Argentina in the Spring of 2009 and, when I came back, just started gearing all of my research efforts towards the themes I had been introduced to," Elisabeth explained. "Dr. Dandeneau [the director of the Chancellor's Honors Program] first mentioned the possibility of a return trip as a form of my senior thesis back in the Fall of 2009 when he heard my enthusiasm about what I had seen and learned. At the time, I wasn't quite sure I believed him in the plan's feasibility, yet here we are! I just kept taking steps toward the potential of doing research abroad and then, just this last November, had to make my final decision, and ... leapt."

Like Ashley, Elisabeth has also received financial support for her research. She is being supported by Chancellor's Honors Program grants and was awarded an Undergraduate Summer Research Internship Scholarship by the Office of Research during the summer of 2010 to prepare for her work abroad.

Elisabeth explained her interest in the region as well as the focus of her research abroad. "I have been doing research on the economic and political history of Argentina, and how it has affected the state's ability to provide social welfare programs to its most vulnerable. What I will be doing in Buenos Aires is actually working with an NGO, gaining the perspective of the non-state actors who have stepped into the position of poverty alleviation in the relative absence of the government," Elisabeth said. "While in Buenos Aires, I will also be conducting interviews with the directors of other NGOs and individuals from research institutes in the city to gain a more complete perspective of poverty programs' effectiveness."

Elisabeth, just at the beginning of her research experience, anticipates some similar challenges to the ones Ashley faced this past summer.

“I think I am more nervous about the research part than being abroad,” Elisabeth explained. “This is my fourth large period of time abroad, and my second time to live in Buenos Aires, specifically. However, it is my first time diving into a field research setting, and so I’m a bit nervous with undertaking something so new and a project this big. Having lived in Argentina before calms me, though, as I won’t have to maneuver a completely new culture and dive into new research processes at the same time. My biggest uncertainty? Perhaps just staying present, being able to follow leads, ask good questions, and make my researching really effective.”

All undergraduate students completing research abroad face similar challenges, but with the financial support of UT departments and the encouragement of UT faculty members, their research projects prove to be exciting and challenging scholastic experiences in new cultural environments.