

Study Abroad in Provence: Life AIXperiences

As study abroad veterans know, it is often only later, long after the program is over, that we realize the full value and impact of the experience on our lives and person. Finishing my third year as the Aix-en-Provence program director, curiosity on this topic led me to reach out to my former program participants to find out where life has led them since 2011-12 and 2013-14, and ask them to reflect on the impact study abroad has had on them. Their responses, excerpted below, were movingly articulate, and insightful, confirming the lasting value of the study abroad experience.

-- Kelly Sax, Resident Director

Aix-en-Provence study abroad program, 2011-12, 2013-14, and 2017-18

Monica Gregory (BA French and Anthropology '13 , MPA '16)

I was a student in Aix-en-Provence for the 2011-2012 academic year. My time in Aix was tough but extremely rewarding. Professionally, my language skills and cultural immersion experience come up in every interview I've had since returning. It helped me get job offers like peer counselor at IU's Office of Overseas Study, TAPIF assistant in southern France, research assistant at a nonprofit in the Dominican Republic, and policy intern at the OECD in Paris. Most recently, it was a factor in my competitiveness for a two-year NOAA Fellowship I started in 2016 and completed this week (!). My newest position working in climate change adaptation in Miami-Dade County starts in June. During that interview, it was clear that my language skills and proven adaptability in new environments put me at the top of their candidate list.

Personally, I am a stronger, more confident person for having spent time in international environments. Additionally, I understand better the struggles our own immigrants face and potential ways to ease their lives in the U.S., a perspective we desperately need in our country today. Living abroad has its ups and downs, but I love how much you learn about yourself in the process. If I could give one piece of advice to any undergraduate student, it would be to study abroad in a place you can immerse yourself in a foreign language. In the long run, it has set me apart professionally and given me a level of confidence and adaptability I never had before.

Megan Moore (BA International Studies '13)

I was an International Studies major at Indiana University with minors in French and Business. I studied abroad in Aix during the spring semester of 2012. Today, I am a strategic communications consultant living in Sydney, Australia. While I unfortunately don't get to use my French skills very often anymore, my time in Aix still had a profound impact on my professional path and who I am as a person.

Following graduation in May 2013, I moved to Paris to complete a 6-month internship with Burson-Marsteller. While working in French is certainly challenging and much different to studying or conversing, it was extremely rewarding and something that probably wouldn't have been an option for me had I not studied in Aix. After returning home, I was hired by FTI Consulting in Chicago, who were impressed with my international experience and language skills. I have since transferred with the company to Sydney.

Studying in Aix opened up professional opportunities for me, but more than that, I believe that I am a more empathetic, confident, and curious person than I was before. Stepping out of my comfort zone and immersing myself in a foreign country, language and culture provided me with the opportunity to view things from a different perspective and further develop my understanding of the world. It is an experience that I wouldn't trade for anything and often find myself wishing I could rewind time to live it all over again!

Bailey Hacker (BA French '13)

I graduated from IU with a BA in French and minors in Spanish, Linguistics, and Communications and Culture in 2013. I spent the 2011-2012 academic year in Aix-en-Provence.

My time and experience in Aix is something that serves me nearly every day. The lessons, though often very difficult and challenging, that I learned there will always stay with me and helped shaped who I am as a teacher today. I not only developed my French speaking and listening skills but that I learned the most about myself and my abilities as a student and life-long learner.

My year in Aix taught me more independence than I could have ever learned by staying stateside, and it opened up more opportunities and relationships than I could have imagined prior to that experience. I still stay very close with the friends (American, French, British, etc) I made there, and we make plans to see each other every chance we get!

After returning to finish my studies at IU, I returned to France to participate in TAPIF (Saint-Brieuc, Bretagne) for one year. Following my year with TAPIF, I found a job teaching Spanish and French while finishing up my add-on degree in WL Education. Luckily, I get to use my French every day in class, and I also have the opportunity to inspire students to develop a sense of the world and a curiosity to go abroad.

This year marked my fourth year teaching at my school. I lead my first group of students in France in June 2017. This summer, I'm spending one month in France with CIEE French Language Intensive High School Study Abroad. So, I write to you today from an institute in Rennes where there are 28 American students in French class beginning what will (hopefully) result in a fruitful first "séjour à l'étranger."

Brianne Eby (BA Psychology '13)

At IU, I majored in psychology and minored in French and international studies. I spent the Spring 2012 semester in Aix.

The research I conducted in France as part of my honors thesis at IU helped me to get accepted into the Environmental Studies program at the University of Colorado-Boulder, where I earned a Master of Science degree studying environmental psychology. From there, I moved to Washington, D.C. to work as an urban policy researcher at the Brookings Institution. I started that job in the middle of a project with partners in Lyon, and you better believe I quickly brushed up on my French to send a couple of emails to the project team there, just to drop the hint that I was available for future work travel abroad. The opportunity didn't come up, but I was pleased at how quickly the language came back! I now work as a transportation policy analyst at another think tank in Washington.

My time in Aix brought two main long-term personal effects: I developed an appreciation for being fully present in everyday situations, and I learned how to be more independent.

For the former, something about living in a place that was so different from my previous experiences but yet, for those five months, was my new normal, made me more acutely aware of what was happening around me. To this day, I can vividly remember the smell of baguettes on walks to and from class. This memory is different than those conjured by looking at a photo from a week long trip; the subtleties of my everyday experience in Aix were the entirety of my life at the time, so they left a more lasting impression and I've since noticed myself integrating this approach of appreciation into other aspects of my daily life.

In terms of independence, while everything about moving abroad and assimilating into a new culture for a period of time renders a person more self-sufficient, for me this was felt most significantly through my lessons in travel logistics. Both in figuring out how to get myself to and from France, but also in navigating between cities and countries while there, I learned how to maximize travel that was somehow both spontaneous and planned, how to solve problems as they arose, and how to prioritize what I wanted to accomplish when visiting a new place.

Robert Coatsworth (BA French and Spanish '15)

I arrived in Aix after spending 9 months in the Spanish capital, Madrid. It was not a “coup de cœur” I was terribly attached to the Spanish language, culture and my experience there. But over the next 12 months I did fall in love with Provence and France. What isn't to love?

I lived in an apartment with two lovely French Mademoiselles. (one with which I still keep in touch, {Isabelle just had a baby }). I joked early on with Kelly that this would be my “Under the Tuscan Sun”. We had a fig tree, a garden and a beautiful view of the mountain made famous by Cezanne, Ste. Victoire. But more important to my experience in France were the conversations held over coffee in the morning or over ratatouille and Côte de Rhône (the classic table red from the region) in the evening. My French improved too quickly for me to keep up. I had no more fear. Nobody even dared respond to me in English by the time I took my first trip to Paris in November. It wasn't just the language that was important, but the exchanges I had with my roommates and friend. My world exploded. I understood more about my identity as an American, as a millennial and as an individual. I was able to piece together the wisdom and savoir-faire of the old world with my American spirit to pursue my projects today.

After the incredible (a word that I do not use lightly) year that I spent in Aix I returned to Bloomington for my senior year. I had the pleasure of working with a small group of French students in a conversation class that met once a week for two semesters (FRIT 118 ?). I was proud to develop my skills as a French speaker and as a teacher. I worked with professor SAX on my capstone project in international studies. I studied gendered language in francophone press. After graduating I participated in the TAPIF program where I was a language assistant in a French high school here in Bordeaux. It was a fulfilling experience. I so much enjoy my time in Bordeaux that I decided to pursue my master's degree in political science at the university of Bordeaux – Montesquieu.

I feel at home in France and today I am confident when I navigate the two cultures. My colorful years abroad through IU study abroad gave me the tools to understand the role I can have in shaping the world and how to take the bull of life by the horns when necessary!

Hannah Ishikawa (BA French and English '15)

I graduated from IUPUI with majors in French and English with minors in International Studies. Study Abroad in Aix for 2013-2014 academic year.

For me, study abroad is such a core element of learning a language. When you live abroad, you live the language and culture. Every day is a learning experience, and the city is your classroom. I am so glad to have had the opportunity to participate in the IU program in Aix-en-Provence. It was without a doubt the most defining year of my undergraduate career. I developed friendships with students from all over the world and learned about the French culture in a personal way. I loved the challenge of taking classes at a French university, which pushed me beyond my comfort level to develop my language abilities and take them to a higher level.

Having been given this wonderful opportunity to explore the world, learn more about it and about myself along the way, I gained a global perspective and a deep appreciation for the French language and culture.

The study abroad experience has had a long-lasting impact on my life. Upon returning home and graduating, I was determined to continue my studies in French. I returned to France that fall as an English Teaching Assistant with the TAPIF program and taught at two high schools. This experience prompted me to pursue a career in teaching, and I enrolled the following year at New York University in their dual degree master's program in TESOL (K-12) and Teaching French as a Foreign Language (7-12). I just graduated this May and recently accepted a position teaching French at Fort Hamilton High School in Brooklyn.

Study abroad played a crucial role in developing my French abilities and broadening my perspective. I will always remember how exhilarating it was for me at the beginning of that year when I realized how much I could achieve with language and communicate with people I might not have otherwise been able to converse with. It unlocked a part of the world for me and allowed me to experience French culture in a profoundly personal way. As I now step into the role of instructor, I hope to bring the language to life for my students as well.

Kristie Pladson (BA French and Comparative Literature '12)

I spent two semesters in Aix from 2011 to 2012 before graduating with a degree in Comparative Literature and French. Being completely honest, the biggest way Aix has impacted my life is that I met my European husband there! (My inner feminist is cringing as I write this). People always say studying abroad offers a valuable chance to get to know people from other cultures. I absolutely have to agree with that, seeing as I “got to know” a lovely German man who I have since married (and who also happens to be a French teacher). I live with him in southern Germany and my permanent E.U. residency just came through a few weeks ago. Along with bagging a European man, since graduating I also spent a year teaching an English in Saudi Arabia before working as an English- and French-language sales manager for a German company in Hamburg. Currently I am completing a master’s degree in journalism in Tübingen. Occasionally I contribute radio reporting from Germany for a friend’s French-language podcast.

My French was not very strong when I first arrived in Aix, and while spending a year there certainly improved it immensely (thanks host family!), almost more valuable to me is how that year taught me to keep my cool in uncomfortable situations. Studying in France was so fun, but it was also one awkward situation after the next, all year long. That is a natural part of the experience (or was that just me?) and I think it is something you need to get used in order to succeed in a foreign setting. Living through that made it easier down the road to do things like move abroad long-term, ask my employer for a promotion and a raise, and handle workplace conflicts. I’ve lived in Europe for four years now, and speaking another language has allowed me to develop relationships I never would have had otherwise. People relax and are happy and excited when they can speak in their mother tongue to an American. It is a rewarding experience on both sides and great P.R. for the U.S. at a time when the media isn’t doing us any favors.

Ellie Berry (BA French and International Studies '13, MPA '18)

I graduated with majors in international studies and French and studied in Aix during the 2011-2012 academic year. After studying abroad in Aix, I felt more comfortable speaking French and navigating everyday situations in France. I did not want to stop travelling, so I decided to apply to be a teaching assistant through TAPIF (twice!). I worked first in Guadeloupe, then in the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region. This year, I completed my Master of Public Affairs at IU’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs and am starting a new job as a research and evaluation analyst at the Indiana Department of Child Services. In addition to language skills and familiarity with French culture which were directly relevant to working as an English teaching assistant, in Aix I gained self-confidence in navigating new situations, taking risks, and putting down roots in new places. I am also incredibly grateful that my year in Aix serves as a reminder of the value in slowing down, enjoying fresh meals, and sipping coffee with friends.

Roz Rini Larson (BA Folklore '13, MA Folklore '15)

It’s hard to articulate exactly how important the study abroad experience was for me. Flying from Chicago to Paris in January 2012 was my first time ever on a plane, my first time ever out of the country or in a dominantly non-English-speaking context, my first time being farther from my family than 3.5 hours by car. I was deeply scared, which manifested itself mostly through a nausea so

thick I could eat nothing for a day and a half before my flight. My French host mother Josette later told me that when I arrived and picked meekly at the plate of jambon and cornichons she put in front of me, she worried about whether I was going to be ok.

But I was ok! In fact, I became more and more ok (and then much better than ok!) as I got to know Josette, my new friends in the APA program, and the beautiful culture of southern France. Learning to work through my anxiety and speak French despite my fear of making mistakes or sounding stupid was profoundly impactful, teaching me (a perfectionist) that I could do interesting and worthwhile things even when they don't come naturally to me at first. That struggle toward my eventual success is something I still regularly think back to when I'm encountering a new and difficult experience, in order to remind myself of how exhilarating it is to prove to myself that I am more capable than I had previously thought.

Not to mention how exhilarating it is to become comfortable enough in a "foreign" language/culture to catch a glimpse what life is like when lived through a different linguistic code! (Normal life experiences became suddenly exciting because they were handled in French; I still remember how thrilled I was the first time I woke up and realized I had been dreaming in French.)

The study abroad experience taught me about myself in ways I believe to be intrinsically connected to my current ability to succeed, but more important is that it taught me something about the world outside my small, circumscribed realm of experience, having lived in Indiana my whole life.

Experiencing a new (to me) cultural milieu simultaneously highlighted for me some of the ways all people are the same—everyone eats, talks, argues, connects, etc., partaking of a common humanity that is always there—as well as some of the ways different groups are refreshingly distinct from one another, offering a compelling plurality of visions for how one can eat, talk, argue, connect, etc.,—how humanity can manifest itself.

Although I was a folklorist before my study abroad experience (I was directly admitted to the College with a declared major in Folklore), I feel like my study abroad in France cemented my desire to learn about the diversity of human culture by affording me an authentic (yet curated) experience with a new cultural and linguistic way of being and living. Obviously there is a much larger continuum of diversity in the world than just that which exists between the US and France, but having such real, human experiences of connection there—connection to people, places, and lifeways distinct from those to which I was accustomed—established in me an optimistic expectation that the world is a largely beautiful, exciting, and welcoming place, despite all the self-evident negatives that exist.

Bianca Davila (BA French and Spanish '13)

I graduated from Indiana University with a double major in Spanish and French with a minor in Portuguese. I had the pleasure of studying in Aix for the spring semester of 2012. After graduation, I joined Teach For America as a Houston, Texas corps member and was a bilingual Spanish English 4th grade teacher. I then went on to get my masters in elementary education from Johns Hopkins University and am heading into my third year as an assistant principal at a charter elementary school here in Houston.

My time in Aix has and will forever be one of the highlights of my life. I still mark it as the most transformative experience of my life. It was in Aix that I learned independence and self-reliance. Most importantly, I learned to live in the moment and take advantage of trying new things whenever possible. It was also in Aix that I found my love for education. I volunteered with a local organization that tutored underserved youth in English. I had the chance to work with a 7th grade girl whom I will always remember. After my time in Aix, I knew that working in education was something that I wanted to pursue and have now devoted my career to. I also treasure the relationships that I built in Aix with several people whom I now consider to be some of my best friends. Aix will always hold a special place in my heart (my husband and I even went to Aix on our honeymoon), and I can't wait to return one day!