As Director of the MA in International Studies, I am responsible for a variety of areas including supervision of graduate assistants, assessment, and the foreign language requirement. The most exciting aspect of the position is overseeing the international field experience that all MAIS students must complete and helping them put together their field experience portfolios.

Over the years MAIS students have represented the full spectrum of political positions, religions, ideologies, ethnic groups, and life experience. Politically, they have been from the left, center, and right. A number were in a branch of the military, had served in the military or were associated in some way with the military. Others had served in the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps or with another humanitarian organization. A few might even have called themselves revolutionaries. We have students who have represented religious organizations, with some having traveled to foreign countries as missionaries.

MAIS students also represent many races and ethnicities. We have had students from North, Central and South America, Asia, Africa and Europe: Japan, Togo, US, China, Trinidad, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, France, Germany, Spain. No Australians so far, however, though we did have one that was half Australian. Each student has brought a different perspective to the field experience and to the portfolio. This diversity contributes to the richness of life in the MAIS Program, for faculty members, myself included, as well as for students.

The diversity of perspectives makes working with students on their field experience portfolios one of the most rewarding projects I have undertaken in my forty years of teaching. Engaging students in discussions of the values and attitudes of the cultures in which they lived and worked forces me to challenge them to articulate and analyze their own values and attitudes. At the same time, it has often made me look again at my own, those that I held when I was a student and those that I hold now. Although the process may be trying at times, I hope that the students find it (or will find it at same moment in the future) as intellectually stimulating as I do.

Dr. Sylvie Henning
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In the fall of 2011 I began the process of preparing for a ten-week field experience. A year later I am looking back on that experience with nostalgia. Never having left the United States before in my life I was, as one would expect, nervous about the experience overall and every little detail in between. By February, 2012, I had not only found a program to attend in the country I had always dreamed of visiting, but I had also made flight and living arrangements. By May, I had gone through a whole host of emotions about the trip and time away from everyone and everything I had ever known. Anxiety, excitement, stress, regret, and more excitement became daily aspects of life up to the time I left my parents at the airport gate.

Three flights, three countries, and two continents later I had arrived in my temporary home for the summer: Bologna, Italy. From the moment I stepped off the plane in Italy I was nervous and excited all at the same time (though this did not register until later because I was sleep deprived and running late). Soon after, I was settling into my new home and learning to adjust to some of the initial cultural differences and beginning to relax. The major Northern Italy earthquakes three days into my trip soon changed that and added to the stress of the trip. Eventually, I found myself immersed in an amazing, eclectic, and sometimes frustrating culture.

The first cultural difference I noticed was between how Americans and Italians approach time. From eating habits to punctuality at work and school, I quickly realized I was no longer in the United States. The combination of jet lag and the entirely different daily lifestyle of Italians threw me off for the first few days of my trip. Eating a multi-course lunch with a large group of people and then having the afternoon off from work or school made the days go by relatively slowly, at least in the beginning. It also took some time to get used to eating dinner anywhere from seven to ten in the evening. Even when I was hungry earlier in the day, restaurants and pizza shops were often closed for a few hours in the early evening, the time I was used to having my dinner. Over time though I adjusted to the eating habits of the culture I was immersed in, so much so that when two friends from America came to visit I felt pulled between the American habits I have always known and the Italian habits I had learned while living in Bologna, Italy’s food capital.

The next dimension of life that I noticed to be particularly different to that of my own American lifestyle was how Italians considered the role of community in their daily routine. As with the pace of life in America, who moves alongside you at that pace is usually very limited and individualism reigns in most aspects of life. We care more about personal choices and freedoms than forming consensus with one another, certainly a true statement when one looks at our government. Individual behavior varies
from what food we order in a restaurant (I never saw a make-your-own menu in Italy) to our schooling with personalized study programs for degrees. While in Italy, I had to make the adjustment to considering those around me and in my social circle when deciding where to go on the weekend or what restaurant to go to after school for the typical group lunch. When going out to eat together, we would have to discuss what type of wine everyone would like because it is customary to share from one large carafe rather than everyone ordering individual glasses of white or red. Even when it came time to pay the bill, the collectivistic personality of Italians comes out and it is common to split the bill evenly between all in attendance rather than dividing the bill according to who ordered which dish.

Similarly, the entire concept of the piazza revolves around a collectivistic attitude toward life and this is one aspect from which I think Americans could certainly learn. Every town has at least one central meeting place where one can go to relax, socialize, and in general enjoy the company of one’s fellow community members. We have a sort of Americanized piazza on our college campuses, such as the Oval at The Ohio State University or the Mall at East Carolina University. Yet, communities in general lack the sense of a town common area. My home town of Minford, Ohio, consists of a few state highways and smaller roads running into the Appalachian foothills but we have no central meeting area for events except the local high school gymnasium or football field. The feeling of belonging to the community could go a long way in American life to making outsiders feel welcome, but our fast-paced lifestyle coupled with our individualistic tendencies, such as having a personal vehicle or participating solely in online course instruction, prevents the connectivity I felt after three months living in an Italian city.

Despite Italy’s sense of collectivity, though, Italians continue to struggle with the idea of a singular Italian national identity. This was the third major cultural difference I observed during my travels and in every city I visited I noticed that identity was regionally rather than nationally focused. Many Italians I spoke to more closely associated with the village, town, or general region they were born in rather than the country as a whole. Though I came back from the trip speaking Italian fluently I do not feel ‘Italian,’ mainly because to be Italian, learning Standard Italian is one aspect of life, but not the most important. The more important factor in being ‘Italian,’ it seems, is having a rich cultural heritage and knowledge of one’s regional dialect. In numerous cases, some Italians speak three, four, or five dialects as well as Standard, so though I feel I learned a great deal from my language immersion program, the sense that I deeply understand a particular regional culture is lacking. I had a great teacher named Paola who taught us a bit about the dialect of Bologna, Bolognese, but if one looks at a map, one is overwhelmed by how many languages truly exist in such a small country in comparison to the vast United States. We have our own dialects and languages, such as Appalachian, Creole, and Hawaiian Pidgin, but I do not think Americans truly understand what it is like to live in a country where, though you have lived there your entire life, the words spoken just miles down the road sound foreign. While Italians are collectivistic in behavior, they are certainly individualistic in linguistic diversity.

I think this dualistic sense of nationality combined with regional pride is both a blessing and a curse for the Italian people. Italians are blessed with a deep understanding of their cultural heritage and of the variety of peoples from they come from were united under one sovereign state one hundred and fifty years ago. Yet, they struggle with forming a national identity for this very reason. The linguistic and dialectical diversity, in combination with Italian’s intense favoritism for their region, has prevented the type of cohesion we have developed in the United States. In other words, the united states of Italy lack the unity we have developed in the United States of America. In contrast, Americans do not always have a clear sense of who they are or where they came from and in many cases they have entirely lost their cultural heritage. As a nation of immigrants, we find it hard to understand why Italy lacks the same cohesion we have, but the two countries have become united under far different circumstances.

On the last day of his program at Madrelingua, the staff and students threw Coty a graduation party and, in Italian tradition, required him to give a speech, in Italian...

Upon reflection, I find that my trip taught me to embrace cultural differences, to think about how I can learn from cultures outside of my own, and how aspects of our own culture may be improved by the integration of non-American behavior. In today’s world, technology is more prevalent than ever and while it was a blessing to have the ability to connect with my family back home daily in most cases, I fear the scholars who have argued against technology’s invasive role in our lives may be right. Italy alone has thirty different languages under threat of extinction and if it is true that a language is a culture then there are thirty cultures in Italy that may soon die out. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to live and study in a foreign nation for an extended period and I feel more aware than ever of the value of cultural and linguistic diversity in our world today.
Dr. Luci Fernandes, known to her students as simply ‘Dr. Luci’, is one of the four professors who teach the core courses for the MAIS program. Dr. Fernandes teaches INTL/ANTH 6005: Communication across Cultures each fall semester, which is taken by not only the MAIS students but also students from Anthropology and other ECU graduate level programs.

Fernandes has been at ECU since 2008 and received her Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut in 2004. Her dissertation focused on documenting the Kichwa Indians community development project Kallari, which offers alternative economic options to people living in the Amazon River Basin region in South America. At East Carolina, Dr. Fernandes teaches online and face-to-face classes for the Department of Anthropology, the International Studies Program, and the Global Understanding Program.

Dr. Fernandes is a cultural anthropologist and her area of interest is in contemporary Cuban history and culture. Since summer 2000, Dr. Fernandes has conducted ethnographic research on various aspects of Cuban society including resource distribution, social networks, and socialist societies in transition.

As a social scientist, she examines Cuba from an anthropological perspective by employing the cultural relativistic approach and emphasizing looking at culture on its own terms rather than comparing it to western liberal models. Dr. Fernandes “examines an alternative societal model by analyzing the political, economic, and social structures that exist in contemporary Cuban society.” She is currently examining humor in Cuban culture and has given presentations nationally and internationally from East Carolina University to the University of Havana.

On her current work Dr. Fernandes says “my current research involves a detailed analysis of resource distribution and social networks. I analyze how people make ends meet despite scarcity of goods, restrictions on trade and business, along with the importance of social relations to guarantee the allocation of goods and services.”

Fernandes also has a manuscript prospectus currently under review with Public Anthropology. Additionally, she has an article that is forthcoming in the Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies that analyzes commemorative monuments of the 1959 Revolution in Cuba. Since 2005, she has collaborated with Anita Waters at Denison University on this research. "Our preliminary findings were presented in May 2011 at the Caribbean Studies Association Annual Meeting in Willemstad, Curacao and our research has been supported in part by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s New Directions Initiative.

Dr. Fernandes also recently taught a new course she created entitled ANTH 4202: Visual Anthropology. In the course, Dr. Fernandes worked with students to document several cultural groups located in the Eastern North Carolina area. Examples of cultural groups
include the tattoo community, the farming community, and the Jehovah’s Witness community. Each culture was documented in a variety of methods, including photography, audio interviews that were developed into podcasts, and a final project consisting of a documentary of the student’s assigned cultural group.

To further engage the community in the class projects, Dr. Fernandes arranged for students to display their photography at The Tipsy Teapot in downtown Greenville, North Carolina. Over a hundred students and community members attended the exhibit and the projects have been displayed at East Carolina’s Joyner Library and a local branch of the BB&T Bank. For their final projects, Dr. Fernandes had students arrange a film night at the ECU campus and showed each students’ documentary to the various cultural groups involved, students, faculty, and community members who attended.

Course Spotlight: INTL 6005 Communication across Cultures

Each student in the MAIS program is required to take four core courses that create a foundation from which the student learns the important concepts related to cultural studies, the global economy, decision-making in an international setting, and acquires a deeper understanding of various international issues. INTL/ANTH 6005: Communication across Cultures is one of those four courses. The course examines the nature of cross-cultural differences, intercultural contacts, language, and other forms of communication. The concept of intercultural communication focuses on the importance of culture in our everyday lives, and the ways in which culture interrelates with and affects communication processes.

“The fact that we live in an era of rapid globalization in which being able to communicate across cultures is imperative to our ability to function in a diverse world,” according to Dr. Luci Fernandes, the current course instructor. Through the use of personal accounts and life stories, cultural assignments, and online discussion, the course increases a student’s sensitivity to other cultures and awareness of his or her own cultural backgrounds as well as the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which we live.

In INTL 6005, Dr. Fernandes believes students learn how to look at cultural diversity and to not view cultural particulars as quaint or anecdotal, but as history and traditions of groups of people. She notes “we approach culture using the cultural relativistic approach, which helps teach students how to interact in multicultural settings, how to analyze different cultural perspectives, and how to get at a deeper level of ‘knowing’ through ethnographic research methods.”

The course itself has several objectives for students to achieve by the end of the semester. These include understanding how communication processes differ among cultures, identifying barriers to effective cross-cultural and intercultural communication, and developing strategies for dealing with these barriers. The course also encourages students to discover the importance of the roles of context and power in studying intercultural communication, to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes that increase intercultural competence, and finally to develop an awareness of contemporary events that illustrate the need for improvised cross-cultural and intercultural communication skills.

The course works well for MAIS because “students who participate in the program are from different cultural backgrounds here in the US, but we also have several international students who participate in our program” giving the students a rich and diverse experience because they are already gaining experiences in an intercultural setting. Students must practice negotiating the meaning of their words and must look at different viewpoints when interacting with their peers.
In regards to the value of incorporating cultural study into such varied disciplines as those that make up the MAIS program, including higher education and security studies, Dr. Fernandes believes “no matter what the chosen field, one must understand cultural variation. At some point you will need to interact with people who look different, speak a different language, have different religious beliefs, etc.” and this need could come during a simple daily interaction or during a crisis situation. Fernandes argues “understanding and knowing how to react in various social settings is crucial to maintaining open communication and cooperation between individuals and groups.” In a globalized world, it is vital to have cultural skills and cultural knowledge. Fernandes also suggests “we must be socially as well as economically and politically prepared.”

Field Experience: Life in America

Hui Lu

It is the time of the year when everybody is on their way back home to be together with families. With no family in this country, I don’t feel lonely. I do miss my family back in China very much, but the amazing friends I have made in the past year made me feel at home. A year and a half in the MAIS program has given me much more than I expected. Everything in the past three semesters has been bliss. I’m still absorbing new things every day: language, culture and knowledge. Now I’m almost done with the program. I just wish I could stay in this program forever, but there are things I must do, such as summarizing what I have learned and getting ready for new challenges.

ECU is one of the few universities offering an MA in International Studies. I have benefited very much from this program. There are so many things I have learned. The first thing is the knowledge passed down by all the brilliant professors. This is a liberal arts program so given the nature of the program there isn’t very much to memorize. It requires more comprehension and critical thinking. Everything comes from extensive reading. Thanks to the inspiring professors and students, the learning process carried on outside class. What we had learned in class was always an important part of our conversations. Another great benefit I got out of the program is the improvement of my language skills. All the core courses in the program involve extensive reading and researching. As an international student, I had a hard time with all the reading and writing assignments. English is not my first language, so I had to spend more time on the assignments than students who speak English as their first language.
When I look back, I realize that all the reading and writing did enhance my language skills very much. Something more important I have learned from all the reading and writing is not the reading and writing itself. The program has taught me how to think, instead of what to think. I learned how to learn. It really expanded my vision from seeing things unilaterally to seeing things multilaterally. The world is flat now so everyone should learn how to think internationally. What’s more, the diversity in the class gave me the chance to be exposed to different cultures. By interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds, I understood the difference behind languages. The way people think differs between different cultures. This means I had the chance to see the world from their perspectives. Looking at things from different angles really opens my mind.

Indeed my main goal at ECU is to finish the program and to pursue a higher degree. I’m here to learn, to study. However, being in another county, I’m learning every minute. I always think that is the beauty of the program. By immersing myself in a different culture, I made the connection between the knowledge I acquired in class and what I experienced in everyday life. This is also why I think I benefited more than I expected from this program. I learned how to adjust and how to survive. I might have exaggerated a little by using the word “survive”, but I did have to deal with culture shock and then learn how to ‘survive.’ There were times when I got homesick and felt lonely, especially when holidays came. Sometimes I got confused facing the different culture all by myself. Luckily I chose the right direction. I opened my mind and tried to embrace the cultural differences. With the help of all my amazing friends, I’m proud to say I survived different phases of culture shock. Now when I see new international students arrive with all the excitement, I see myself. Then I see them struggle to adjust to the culture here, and I again see myself.

Some say you should never forget the culture you come from because that is the root. Some are afraid to embrace the new culture because of the fear of losing their own culture. My experience tells me the opposite. While learning the new culture, I actually had a whole new understanding of my native culture. In the process of interacting with, and adjusting to, a new culture, the cultural difference is always there, it is inevitable. The cultural differences will always remind you of something from your native culture that has been taken for granted the whole time. When I encounter something new in American culture, I always have the habit of going back to Chinese culture and looking for something similar that I can match or compare with. By matching and comparing, I always found something in Chinese culture that I thought I understand but actually I didn’t. Sometimes I felt that I was re-learning my native culture all over again.

The result is that I enhanced the understanding of my native culture while learning a new culture. I guess this is what we called multicultural competence when we had enough experience matching and comparing different cultures.

Another interesting thing from learning the cultural differences is stereotyping. We all have certain stereotypes for people from dif-
ferent cultural backgrounds. In this case, the stereotypes are of American people and Chinese people: what a typical American looks like in the eyes of Chinese people and how a typical Chinese is portrayed in American media. There are many channels through which we learned those stereotypes. I have to admit that some are true but most of the stereotypes are not. Unfortunately stereotyping of people from different cultural backgrounds is what causes misunderstanding and stops people from opening their minds and understanding different cultures. I had friends ask me about my stereotypes of American people and some other strange questions. I completely understand them because of the lack of exposure to different cultures. Before I came here to see the country and the people for myself, I hadn’t had enough opportunities really to learn a new culture from good sources. I held on to certain stereotypes and mistook them for the real cultures. Movies and other media were my major sources for learning another culture, which is how stereotypes spread. The studying and living experience has proven me wrong and taught me how to understand different cultures in a proper way.

To me, social life is an important part of learning. By interacting with people from different backgrounds with different experiences, I learned things that I could never have learned from textbooks. I believe the world is bigger than a book. Most of the time, we learn from our experiences and from our mistakes. Everyone has a story; by sharing stories, we learn from each other. When you place yourself in a diverse environment, you share stories with unique cultures blended in them. International students don’t have families here. All we have are friends, friends who look out for each other, friends who take care of each other. We are all from different backgrounds but we share similar experiences. American culture is a highly individualistic. The relationship among friends is more independent in general. However, in the past year and a half, I had a close-knit group. I believe that we built a firm friendship that will never sink. In China, people value EQ (Emotional Quotient) higher than IQ (Intelligence Quotient). People believe in today’s society, networking is more important than intelligence most of the time. I’m not denying the importance of hard work, but when facing such fierce competitions, a person must know how to market himself to the right person in the right position.

Another lesson I have learned from the past a year and a half is how to become a complete person. I have grown up quite a bit during the three semesters of studying and living abroad. I’m the only child in my family so I’m always that little child in my parents’ eyes. Here I’m on my own. I have to make decisions independently. I have to deal with troubles independently. Indeed I have friends who are always there for me. They helped me through tough times. But I can’t rely on them forever. There is something I must do, which is called growing up. I have to learn to develop a complete personality. I have to learn what is right and what is wrong. I have to learn the necessary skills in order to survive.

There has been excitement, anxiety, and all kinds of complicated feelings in the past three semesters. I can’t thank everyone enough for supporting me. Thanks to all my amazing friends, who make me realize that I’m not alone. Facing identity change and new challenges, I’m ready. I used to be afraid of graduation because I kept telling myself I was not ready. Now I’ve learned that you will never be ready unless you believe you are ready. I realize that I used the word “learn” repeatedly in this essay. This is the best word that summarizes the wonderful journey I had in the International Studies program. Now I guess it is time for me to go on and start a new journey.
Concentration Highlight: Security Studies

Each student in the MAIS program chooses one of several concentration areas that includes a set of coursework related to a specific field of study, ranging from international education to business. Security Studies, in a world forever changed by the events of September 11, 2001, has become a popular concentration in the MAIS program. Students have found great success in combining the cultural and security coursework. Several alumni now work in various government agencies in Washington and throughout the American intelligence community.

Many MAIS students also choose to incorporate a Security Studies (SECS) certificate into their time at East Carolina. Dr. Alethia Cook, Director of Security Studies, advises students in the undergraduate minor, certificate, and graduate programs. Certificate students include not only those from the MAIS program but also from the Masters in Public Administration (MPA), Masters of Science in Criminal Justice (MSCJ), and Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programs as well as others.

The certificate itself is a 15-hour (five courses) non-degree program that includes two core courses on Security Studies Foundations and Changing Nature of National Security. These are followed by elective courses in Security Studies on varied topics such as the Middle East, information security, terrorism, emergency/disaster planning, and cryptography. Another benefit is that many of the courses are offered in a distance education format, allowing MAIS students away from East Carolina completing their required field experiences the opportunity to finish concentration coursework at the same time.

Dr. Cook teaches the Security Studies Foundations course as well as a course on Weapons of Mass Destruction that MAIS students have the option of including as a certificate elective. Regarding the role a Security Studies certificate plays in the MAIS program; Dr. Cook thinks “that the MAIS students find the SECS classes present valuable information about important aspects of national security.” She also notes “the Security Studies coursework is truly a concentration for MAIS students—there is some overlap in the content across courses in the two programs, so while SECS introduces new concepts and ideas, it also reinforces lessons learned in the MAIS program.” Additionally, if an MAIS student chooses the additional six credits in the Security Studies Non-Thesis Option in the MAIS program, s/he can complete the certificate without any additional credit hours beyond those already required by the MAIS.

With students coming from several different graduate programs to take coursework in SECS, the diverse backgrounds can create unique dynamics in class discussions. Dr. Cook notes “MAIS students are an invaluable addition to the Security Studies classes” because “many in this diverse student population have had limited opportunities to learn about foreign cultures, the international system, or the variety of security challenges encountered by other countries in the world.” Dr. Cook points out that MAIS students in the SECS certificate program come away with new perspectives as well, ones they do “not necessarily learn in their MAIS classes which come from the law enforcement officers, military personnel, and other disciplines” with which MAIS students engage in class discussion.
Finally, Dr. Cook supports the field experience dynamic of the MAIS program and the role that experience plays in the growth of students. Combined with the cultural studies work students complete for the MAIS, students’ field experiences can be valuable in the classroom as well. Dr. Cook believes “the field experience gives students excellent material they can work into their discussion contributions and papers” and allows students to further “illustrate and enrich points they are trying to make with the knowledge gained overseas.” She also noted “nothing makes one more globally-conscious than spending time abroad,” a critical component of the MAIS that works well for students who additionally do the SECS certificate.

For more information on the Security Studies certificate program and offered courses, students can visit the program’s page at http://www.ecu.edu/polsci/sec/ge.html. Additionally, students can email Dr. Cook with questions at cooka@ecu.edu. For information on the general concentration requirements and thesis/non-thesis options for the MAIS program, students can visit http://www.ecu.edu/cs-cas/mais/programcomponents.cfm or email the MAIS program director, Dr. Sylvie Henning at hennings@ecu.edu.

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**MAIS at Duke University**

Recently three students from the MAIS program, Justin Brown, Zach Cooper, and Coty Martin, had the opportunity to attend a conference at the Duke University School of Law in Durham, North Carolina. The conference, entitled “Battlefields, Boardrooms, and Backyards: The New Face of National Security Law,” focused on the legal issues involved with a variety of topics in the field of national and international security. The three MAIS students all have concentrations in Security Studies. Coty will be graduating from the program this May while Justin and Zach will be graduating in 2014.

Experts discussed cyber war, robotic weapons, security technology and privacy, business and national security issues, military commissions, civil-military relations, piracy, and maritime legal issues including the recent spat between China and Japan over a group of small islands in the East China Sea.

The keynote speaker on the first day, Professor Michael N. Schmitt, is the Chairman of the International Law Department at the Naval War College. Professor Schmitt spoke on the Tallinn Manual on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Warfare, a three-year project to examine how to apply international law to the new form of warfare. The keynote speaker on the second day, MG Robert Scales (Ret.), is a retired US Army Major General and former Commandant of the US Army War College who now works as a military analyst, news commentator, and author. Scales spoke on the contemporary challenges to leadership and civil-military relations and how the US educates new generals.

These were followed by moderated panels which included speakers from the various branches of the military, academia, the ACLU, Human Rights Watch, and private corporations such as Microsoft. While none of the MAIS students have a legal background, they appreciated the diverse perspectives and enhancement of knowledge on the numerous security issues frequently discussed in their coursework.
Students in the MAIS program work in a variety of offices and locations around campus. From research for individual professors to serving as teaching assistants for undergraduate courses to working in administrative positions, MAIS students have filled a variety of roles around the East Carolina campus. Below are pictures of students who have worked at ECU’s International House which serves both US students planning to study abroad as well as international students who are attending East Carolina for their own study abroad experience.
Field Experience: Life in Ecuador

Ryan Cobey

Having made the decision to carry out my field experience in Ecuador, my intentions were to immerse myself in the country’s culture as much as possible while completing the required research for my thesis. I had one specific question to constantly ask during my trip; what do Ecuadorians consider a good life, or *buen vivir*? As the weeks passed, however, I found myself beginning to ask an entirely new question; what do I consider a *buen vivir*? This is a question that I truly had never asked myself, perhaps because I had never allowed myself the time to sit down and truly think about the most important things in my life.

I was a person constantly on the go; I truly did live to work, to advance myself as both an individual and a professional in the environment in which I grew up. I came from a family of migrants, from the type of people who travelled to the land of opportunity from Europe in the late 1800s and built cities like New York into the massive testaments to the power of humanity that they are today. It was my job to continue that proud tradition; my family allowed me the opportunity to continue my education and, despite some heavy bumps in the road, we all supported each other, one way or another. My definition of a good life was advancing myself, as my family wanted me to. At least, that’s what I thought I wanted from life, until I found myself in an entirely different world. Below I present both the preparation and outcome of my field experience in Ecuador, describing how the MAIS program had prepped me for living abroad and then how both my mindset and values have personally changed as a result of my experience in Ecuador.

Throughout my graduate program, I was taught not only to respect other cultures, but exactly how to go about opening myself to the opportunity of learning when placed in a cultural context different from my own. The significance of this is that, despite the fact that many people have the desire to learn about other cultures and visit other places, many lack the mental tools necessary to properly prepare themselves for experiencing a life completely different from their own. As equally important as experiencing new cultures and immersing oneself in new social concepts is the knowledge gained from doing so. Being able to understand why you feel the way you do, comprehending your apprehensiveness or willingness to integrate when you become the ‘other’, is vital to getting the most out of an experience abroad. In my case, I was placed in a collectivist, high-context society. I had learned from my program that these high context societies were typically more collectivist in nature, focusing strongly on the importance of interpersonal relationships and the community in general. This differed greatly from the lower context, individualist culture I was used to. My classroom experience did not necessarily prep me for exactly how to act and react to different cultural situations, rather, the classes provided information on important cultural concepts and trained me in how to decipher one specific culture from another. It was this experience that became essential for me when considering the most appropriate responses during difficult cultural situations.
In my letter of intent I described my intentions for complete immersion into the country as the most practical way of truly understanding the lifestyle of Ecuadorians and obtaining data I needed for my thesis research. Looking back at my intentions, I am pleased to say that I believe I truly accomplished what I set out to discover. In Ecuador I rarely, rarely spoke English. In fact, the only time I ever used, heard or saw English came from my sparse contact with family and friends back home. It was both a humbling and amazing experience; I found myself listening much more than I normally would when speaking in my native tongue. Doing simple things, such as watching the television or reading the newspaper in the morning, required much more concentration and mental effort. My brain constantly hurt, especially for the first two weeks I was in Ecuador. It is important to note that the woman I stayed with spoke absolutely no English, a request I specifically made with the international house when setting up my housing situation. Despite the rigors of initial interaction with both my host mother and Ecuadorian society in general, creating a situation for myself where I was forced to interact entirely in a foreign language enabled me to in just months speak fluent Spanish, and opened up opportunities for me to work with Latino organizations in the US after my field experience.

The significance of being the ‘other’ had helped me to gain a much better understanding of the struggles migrant populations face every day in the US, and my interviews and time spent interacting with Ecuador’s citizens helped me understand the sheer importance of interpersonal relationships and social development not as an alternative, but as a complement to the socio-economic development of a society. Through being able to pull away from the mindset of a tourist and placing myself in the context of an actual resident, I created a routine; I attended classes at the local university, taught private English lessons and engaged in volunteer work at local churches.

This type of immersion was essential to truly understanding the culture, a concept I was quickly confronted with when I was asked to work with a group of Christian missionaries from Louisiana who were in Ecuador for two weeks to teach English at local churches. The pastor of the church I frequented asked me one morning if I could work with the group because he was unsure how much Spanish the missionaries knew despite the fact that they meant to teach their native language to churchgoers. I was amazed by the turnout of locals who were enthused to learn English, but equally amazed by the lack of cultural or social knowledge these missionaries, despite their sheer kindness and willingness to work with the local population, had regarding the culture in which they were ‘called’ to work. For them, it was a two week trip to teach, not learn, and they did not make an effort to experience and understand the culture to which they were teaching. Having spent two months living in the culture at this point, witnessing the experiences and mindsets of other Americans, especially those in Ecuador under different agendas, provided me an way to view my culture through a different lens.

Life slowed down significantly for me in Ecuador. My time spent in the small Andean country gave me the opportunity to clear my mind and think about what I truly wanted out of life. It was not until I was sitting in the kitchen of my host mother’s house near
the end of my trip, holding the hand of a very special woman while talking to Francisco, that I realized what I truly consider a *buen vivir*. I was there with the most important people with which I had met and shared life over the past three months of my journey during my last night in Ecuador. For a brief moment during our long interview on Ecuador’s economic policies, we paused and discussed the Vice Minister’s personal views on the concept of *buen vivir*, not as it is defined by the Ecuadorian government nor interpreted by academics, but as it is truly felt. Francisco paused for a moment during dinner, and said:

“…the idea of living is *this* (pointing at all of us sitting together in the kitchen). It’s enjoying the best moments of life. It’s about having a good chat with good friends, having a good meal, enjoying the view, developing relations with society, with people, and living with what is.”

I still play that scene over and over in my head to this day, thinking about the moment when I first realized what living a good life meant to me. I took a great deal of information from my investigation into Ecuador’s new political development model, but perhaps one of the greatest things I took from my investigation and field experience is not something that can be placed in the context of a thesis. I finally understood what it was that I wanted to accomplish in life, that is, what my personal *buen vivir* was. Simply put, my *buen vivir* is to experience new cultures, raise a family, and place myself into a position of work which will allow me to use my experience to help others. It is a simple endeavor, but a meaningful one nonetheless. It is one that has fueled my desire to continue advancing myself personally and professionally, however, this desire is no longer fueled solely through individual interests. The lessons during my fieldwork have not only trained me to be more equipped for the international professional world, they have enabled me to truly understand what I want to accomplish. It is important for us as United States citizens to understand that, despite the significant diffusion of American influences throughout the world, living a good life is simply not the same in many places as it is in our country. In some places, the individualistic mindset takes a backseat to the community as a whole, and living simpler is considered living rich.

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**GSAIS Profile & Activities**

The Graduate Student Association of International Studies currently consists of Master of Arts in International Studies students at East Carolina. However, the members voted in February to in the future include students from the Master of Science in Security Studies program students and the Master of Business Administration program students who are focusing on international aspects of their field. GSAIS members also voted to include undergraduate students in the International Studies program, starting in Autumn 2013.

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Above: (Left to Right) Alexis McCloskey, David Williamson, Coty Martin, Justin Brown, Marcus Bell, Zach Cooper, Yana Bardashevich, Nathalie Baptiste, Cecilia Lindsay, Liyao Zhao, Lauren Stefan, and Phylicia Quay
Alumni Connections

Jerry Tsao

Jerry graduated in 2012 and recently moved to Washington, DC. He worked temporarily as a paralegal at Huron Consulting Group before accepting an offer as a Sales Operations Analyst at MicroStrategy, a global leader in business intelligence technology.

He is part of a team that provides integrated reporting, analysis, and monitoring software that helps organizations make better business decisions. Some clients include Facebook, Starbucks, eBay, Netflix, Whole Foods, and Yahoo.

At East Carolina University, he completed his Master’s thesis on the perceptions of American fast food in China. He interviewed Chinese informants in Beijing for his data. His research experience from the M.A. International Studies’ program at ECU helped Jerry land a job at MicroStrategy.

Alumni Connections

Ryan Cobey

Having graduated in 2012 after completing his thesis on the Republic of Ecuador’s alternative political and economic development model, Ryan has recently moved to Ecuador to pursue a career in government and higher education.

Ryan currently works as coordinator of international communication for Ecuador’s Board of Accreditation, Evaluation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CEAACES). He also teaches classes at Universidad de las Americas (UDLA) in Quito, Ecuador as a professor of international relations.

Ryan hopes to pursue a PhD in International Relations and/or Latin American Studies in the near future, and seeks to continue working to improve the quality of higher education for students in Ecuador and throughout Latin America.
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