



Florence Cathedral and view of city. Source: pexels.com

# BUFFS *abroad*

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## Speaking from Experience: A President’s Perspective on Study Abroad

Carolina Galloway

*As a professor in the College of Architecture at Texas A&M, Dr. Walter Wendler had the opportunity to lead a semester-long study abroad program. The experience, which he referred to as remarkable on more than one occasion, made an impact not only on the students participating in the program, but also in his and his family’s lives. As he described his most memorable moments, I saw reflection in his eyes. That’s when the words of John Maxwell started to resonate in my head: “A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.” Based on his own experience, Wendler shared lessons learned, challenges encountered, and the benefits of studying abroad, a valuable message to faculty, students, parents, and the community as a whole.*

In the spring semester of 1984, 75 Texas Aggies studied in Firenze, Florence,

Italy on a program led by Dr. Wendler and another faculty member. Students were required to enroll in 12 credit hours, which included courses like Design, Structures, and Italian Architecture History. The program also included activities with the local community. Wendler laughed as he recalled playing soccer against the locals – and losing to them every time. “Those Italians can play soccer,” he said.

Since early in his career as a faculty member, Wendler has known international experiences are highly beneficial to students. “[Students] got to see the broader world, especially from an architecture perspective,” he said. He expressed that this was an opportunity for him to help students extend their vision of the world and discover what a foreign place had to offer. What Wendler

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### FACULTY-LED PROGRAMS 18-19:

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- **Scandinavia 2019**, Denmark/Sweden, 5/10—5/22
- **Spanish Immersion and Service Learning**, Dominican Republic, 5/10—5/22
- **Contextualized Practice**, Hong Kong, 5/12—5/23
- **How Museums and Cultural Institutions are Impacted by Media and Social Media**, UK/France, 5/13—5/26
- **WTAMU Ag Spanish**, Panama, 5/13—5/22
- **Ag in Australia**, Australia, 5/14—5/30
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**WANDERLUST:** (n) a strong desire or urge to travel & explore the world.

# Speaking from experience (cont.)

found most interesting was the fact that being in a new environment did not shock students as much as he had expected. He argues it is because “as human beings we have a tremendous amount in common.” Wendler believes international travel reinforces the value of individuals. He stated that these experiences are important in the development of insight and critical thinking. “They reinforce, for me, how important the education of the whole human being is,” Wendler said.

For Wendler, leading a study abroad program was greatly rewarding. It helped him connect with and understand students at a different level. Wendler explains that in a traditional course taught on campus, students come to class but their interaction with their professors usually ends when they leave the classroom. However, on an immersive study abroad program, the faculty leader becomes a mentor and students usually seek their faculty leader’s guidance, even for personal matters. Thus, he believes study abroad allow experiences faculty to get to know students individually and even learn some of the concerns they have about life. His advice to faculty who lead programs is simple: “Be ready for things that will surprise you as a faculty member because you are dealing with the students’ personal lives.”

Wendler thinks that studying abroad can have a huge impact on people. As a professor and mentor of this group, he witnessed a transformational change that occurred to one of the participants. Wendler recalls a student named Robert, who one night was just standing in front of the fireplace, homesick. The student had never left home before, had never been away from his family, and had never even been on a plane. Wendler described the moment when he spoke to Robert, encouraging him to persevere and reassuring him that things would be fine. And they were; Wendler said Robert successfully completed the program in Florence. Then, Wendler continued, “In

1996, I was at an AIA convention in Boston. At the time, I was still at A&M and he [lived] in Dallas. We met at this convention and he told me that the most important experience of his life was going away and being on his own [on that program].” Wendler said that even though it is important to make progress toward an academic degree while studying abroad, the other skills people learn on such experiences are essential as



Dr. Walter Wendler

well. “I know he learned some *stuff*, but that day of the AIA convention, 10 years later, what he told me was that this experience changed his life and gave him a completely different view of the world. This had a tremendous impact on me.”

Similar to Robert, some of our students have not had the opportunity to travel abroad. In a number of cases, students may be hesitant about experiences that push them outside of their comfort zone; in other cases, parents may be apprehensive about these opportunities. Wendler believes these apprehensions are often well founded and thinks it is because when “students are off

on their own, the level of supervision is different.” That is why, he thinks, a student needs to understand personal responsibility and the importance of appropriate decision making if they wish to study abroad. Wendler also recommends that, as an institution, we must help students prepare for study abroad and assure the parents their students will continue making progress towards their academic degree and professional aspirations. “When people understand that this can contribute to learning directly, they get it,” he said. Wendler believes that international programs give a chance for students to see and understand that the world is large and is different than their hometown. “It is a big world out there, but there are many similarities. You can go into the AISD where more than 41 languages are spoken and that gives you a little bit of flavor, but it doesn't give the whole experience,” he says.

***Sitting with Dr. Wendler for this interview was a great privilege for me. After hearing him speak of his own experience, I got curious about one last thing, so I asked him: if you were a college student today and could go anywhere in the world to study, where would you go and why? I did not expect a specific country to be named, yet his answer took me by surprise: “In Architecture, typically students would take the Grand Tour of Europe. But I would take Horace Greeley’s advice, ‘Go west, young man.’ That’s where the future is. Knowing what I know now, I would likely get on the Pacific Rim and go to Vietnam, China, Taiwan, or Japan. I’ve been there before and these places are intriguing, especially Vietnam. There is so much entrepreneurialism in both North and South Vietnam, in my experience, and there is so much to learn there. Take a risk, try something new.”***

*The original interview was edited for length and clarity.*

# Tori Grist: How Study Abroad Shaped My Life

*Tori Grist*

I own a pair of black WTAMU sweatpants that are a size too big for me. Originally, I bought them for football games and late nights studying in the JBK, but I still wear them around Germany in winter, though it's considered weird. They remind me of home. I had to adjust the way I dressed when I moved abroad, including wearing more dresses and having warmer clothes for the German winter. I always tell people that, first and foremost, I'm a proud Texan, however, that is no longer the entire aspect of my identity. When I studied abroad, it changed my entire perspective about the world around me, and I can see those changes in almost every aspect of my daily life.

That change started in the Spring of 2016. I spent the semester studying abroad in Reggio Emilia, Italy through USAC. Studying in Italy gave me a chance to chase my "Roman Holiday" and "Lizzie McGuire Movie" dream. I wanted to ride on the back of a scooter, enjoying the sites of Roma. I decided to live in the little city of Reggio Emilia because it had a similar population to Amarillo, it was located by train fairly close to Milan,

Bologna, and Florence, and it was much cheaper than other programs in larger cities. This program also had several courses that fit my degree program at WT, yet allowed me to take some fun courses as well, such as my Italian cooking course. Though I studied abroad to gain more independence, the program provider, USAC, supported me in almost every aspect of their time abroad, including applying for a visa, getting housing, taking a language course, and getting a residency permit. I got so lucky to be in a program where I was given the opportunity to enjoy traveling and meeting new people without having to figure out the more difficult things alone. The program had over 60 participants, mostly Americans and only two boys. I originally was terrified about my ability to make friends with this group, but it took less than a week for me to make some amazing travel companions and life-long friends. The group I became a part of was an eclectic one, and everyone's weird just kind of meshed well together. We travelled to several different countries together, ate a ridiculous amount of Nutella and gelato, and even accidentally went to Rome. We had gone on a day trip



*Scooter Tour in Rome.  
Courtesy of Tori Grist*

to Florence, but missed our stop, and, by the time we had figured out where we were, it actually made more sense to stay on the train all the way to Rome than to try to find a return to Florence.

Studying abroad was a mix of amazing adventures and I wouldn't change any of it. However, I didn't learn Italian, and I didn't make friends with any of the locals. Because of this, I wanted to return to Europe after I graduated from WTAMU. When I got a job as an au pair, a sort of nanny abroad, in Germany, I was excited for the chance to move abroad again. I wanted to go back to an area I had visited and fallen in love with, as well as learn the language my grandmother grew up speaking.

Living abroad as an au pair was definitely an entirely different experience than studying abroad. I had to budget a lot more, I was no longer surrounded by Americans, and I moved with my 4 lb dog,

*(cont. page 4)*



*Ruins in Rome.  
Courtesy of Tori Grist*

# Tori Grist (cont.)

meaning I couldn't just pick up and leave for a weekend. I also did not have the amazing language program that was set up for me in Italy, so learning German has been extremely difficult. For one year, I worked for two families, one in Mulheim an der Ruhr and the other in Dortmund. When I had completed the one year I was allowed to work as an au pair, I decided to go back to school in Germany. Organizing paperwork and arranging meetings to complete the visa process has been all about precision and perfect timing, something that was not always accomplished, however, I got lucky.

This October, I started my Master in Cognitive Science at Ruhr-Universität Bochum. I ultimately want to continue my education and eventually become a professor. Studying and living abroad has definitely influenced my entire future career. I'm not sure if I would have found my current degree program in Bochum had I not lived in the cities neighboring it. I learned a lot about myself from my year off from school. I had originally planned to pursue counseling or school psychology, but, now I'm interested in research, a field I hadn't even let myself consider before.

These past few weeks have even taken some adjustment, because, for the first time, I'm living abroad with no clear cut timeline for when I'm going to return to the United States. It's now a long term commitment for at least the next two years. Because of this, my perspective on home has changed. A lot has happened this past year, and I know a lot more will change in the years to come. My brother will graduate from high school in May and I'm not sure if I will make it home to see him graduate. It's a sacrifice not only I have to make, but my family does too. I'm extremely grateful that they have given me the opportunity and support to continue living in Germany. Missing friends and family has been the most difficult part of being abroad, and it's the one thing that doesn't really change or get any easier, though I know I can call or text my family anytime I need them.

Despite difficulties, I've been able to make some really amazing friends here in Germany and really experience the culture, unlike in Italy. Because I lived with a German family and have mostly German friends, I sometimes go for a month or two without speaking, in person, to a native English speaker. It's changed how I live and it's actually influenced how I speak. I say things like 'football' and 'American football', I occasionally use German grammar or make grammatical errors I hear from non-native English speakers, and I've almost completely lost my Texas accent. I recycle without thinking, I enjoy traditional German food, and sometimes forget that there was a time in my life when I didn't have to translate things like signs and menus from German. I've been able to immerse myself with people from

different cultures and hometowns that have never heard of Amarillo or West Texas. I can decide whether or not I want to embrace aspects their culture or pick my own. For example, I still love wearing cowboy boots and making fried chicken, but I also enjoy wearing Doc Martens and can make homemade pasta.

I used to think that I would have everything figured out by the time I was 23, but my time abroad taught me that change is a constant part of life. I learned that it's okay to change my mind, consider things that I hadn't before, and experience life just as it comes. I can now look at myself and the world around me to help decide what is right for me. This experience has changed me into a person that I'm proud of, who loves travel but still appreciates where she comes from. ●



# BUFFS ABROAD '18 photo contest winners



Congratulations to the winners of this year's photo contest and thanks to all who participated! Here are the first, second and third places for each category, and the winner of the People's Choice.

## NATURAL AND URBAN LANDSCAPES



**First Place: "Winter in Morocco"**

Morocco

By Roger Onofre



**Second Place: "Church at the Hacienda Santa Clara"**

Mexico

By Amanda Bell



**Third Place: "Albaicin"**

Spain

By Carolina Brea

# PEOPLE, CULTURE & SOCIETY



**First Place: "Gondola Ride"**

Italy

By Vanessa Faulkner



**Second Place: "Accidental Renaissance"**

Italy

By Lam Nguyen



**Third Place: "Blissful Day"**

Fiji

By Karina Hernandez

# SEND ME THERE!

## First Place: *"You Never Know Which Lives We Influence"*

Mexico

By Brianna Barreras



## Second Place: *"Forti Bufali"*

Italy

By: Sara Wall



## Third Place: *"Vale la Pena"*

Costa Rica

By: Baylor Graham

## PEOPLE'S CHOICE



***"Buffs in the Sun"***

Fiji

By Karina Hernandez

### **SPECIAL THANKS TO THE JUDGES FOR THIS YEAR'S PHOTO CONTEST:**

Susan Allen

Tracy Helbert

George Pacheco

Giselle Alvarado

Hillary Long

Barbara Palmer

Mike Cook

Neil Meredith

Megan Ward

And to all who helped us choose the *People's Choice* winner by voting on our Facebook page!

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