

Sarah Gress
Final Report
IE3 / CFHI
Internship – Córdoba, Argentina

What are your initial impressions of the organization and an overview and thoughts about the kind of work you've started doing; how does the work match your expectations, how does it match your goals?

I think that both the director, Carlos as well as the assistant director, Charly are both very professional and kind. They are helpful in all ways, really concerning themselves with my happiness with the program as well as my overall wellbeing while here. They are fantastic! The work that I'm doing has met and exceeded my goals. I have had the opportunity to rotate in any department that I am interested in and in general, most all the staff are very welcoming and helpful. These are teaching hospitals, so I am also able to interact with medical students, which is great. I am seeing medical procedures, patient consultations, physician and patient interactions...everything that I had hoped for. I am also very excited to have the ability to immerse myself in the Spanish language. I couldn't be happier.

What stood out to you the most regarding your arrival?

With regard to the hospitals, what stood out most was the condition of the facility and the lack of resources. I was also surprised to see how public healthcare functions here and just the sheer amount of people crowding the hallways. Stray dogs in the hospital lobby...wow. Another thing that really stands out is the teamwork and camaraderie among the staff. There doesn't seem to be the same hierarchy as in the US, often times I cannot tell between who is a doctor, nurse or even a director until someone points it out. Everyone greets each other with a kiss without fail. There is a warm and friendly atmosphere always.

What was your greatest anxiety prior to departing and how do you feel about that now that you have arrived?

I think that I was most anxious about crime and being targeted etc. I felt that I would stand out as a tourist, get lost in the city, always and have to worry constantly about pick pocketing, etc. I feel much more comfortable now about getting around in the city and have learned the ins and outs, etc. I take precautions of course, but definitely do not feel unsafe. I have learned to be independent and found my way around the city by taking walks (and in the beginning carrying my map) and being more confident of my surroundings. I am also not afraid to ask questions and talk to people in restaurants, stores, at the hospital etc. Locals have been very helpful, making sure they give me advice about what not to do, where not to go, etc.

How are things going at work now that you have settled in for a bit? How does

this align with your professional goals that you set for yourself? What would you like to achieve in the next half of your internship?

Work is good, although there are some departments which are better, some are worse. What I mean by this is just the overall experience and interactions that I have with doctors and staff. There is not usually one person in particular that is designated to take me under their wing so to speak. I have learned that I have to be as outgoing as possible, which is not always easy depending on the group of people or the patients that are being seen. Sometimes it can just be a language barrier as well. Also, it really just depends on the personalities of the staff. Some doctors are amazing and have the spirit of a teacher...they explain in detail, engage me and ask me questions, etc. While others, seems to not really care if I'm there or not, which is fine too. With these physicians, it is harder to ask questions for fear that I am annoying or distracting them! Overall, I am still learning by observation alone, so I still feel that my professional goals are being met.

How are things going relative to your personal goals? In which areas have you made progress and where do you still have some room to expand? What do you want to make sure you address before you leave?

My personal goals have been challenged the most. It has been really difficult to immerse myself. The first few weeks were extremely uncomfortable for me in my host home. I did not feel very welcomed. I envisioned a very warm family who embraced me as a visitor, etc. and who would be overly interested in getting to know me, etc. and I really didn't feel that way at all. I felt at times as if I was just being tolerated. Pretty much only my host sister made an effort to talk to me, the others in the household, not so much. I learned later, that there were some existing family problems that were causing the tense environment and really had nothing to do with me. Over the course of my time there, tensions eased as I became more familiar with the family dynamics. Also, I think that as I formed a bond with the family, some members opened up to me much more and I was able to learn a bit more about the history and the relationships that they had with one another. I was also not used to relying on other people's schedules such as mealtimes, etc. I was not comfortable just going into the kitchen and making food just for myself and wasn't always invited to eat when a meal was prepared. Trying to integrate into someone else's home and lifestyle is incredibly difficult. I made a decision to take more initiative around the house to cook, clean and just be present. I think that I had to learn to be comfortable without necessarily waiting to be "invited" to do so. Once I did so, I think that really broke the ice and I began to feel more at ease. There is probably always room to expand my personal goals. One thing that I try to do more of is inviting my host sister to cook with me, as opposed to just cooking by myself. It doesn't bother me at all to cook alone, but I also wanted my host sister to know that if she wants to learn a recipe or just hang out with me, that I welcomed it. The time that I spent in the house, cooking and being there during meals was a crucial element to building a relationship with my host family.

How are things going relative to your cross-cultural goals? What kinds of experiences have stood out to you so far? What do you want to ensure to

experience before you leave?

I think this is going well. I feel like my language skills are improving and this gives me the ability to communicate on a deeper level with locals here and really experience the culture. I have really noticed my tendency to want to say, "in the US, we do things this way". I have learned that to fully experience the culture, I have to leave my US mentality in another place. There are little and big things that stand out to me, such as the siesta, the observation of holidays and Sundays here (the entire city shuts down without fail), the incredible long lines for everything, the stray dogs (and feces) on every street, etc. Before I leave, I want to sit in a park or plaza and drink mate with a local! This seems to be one of the most authentic Argentine things here to experience!

Describe a day in your life – what is your work schedule like, what do you do after work, how do you balance your time between work and exploring life outside of work?

I leave my house around 7-ish during the week for the hospital to be there by 8 am. I like to buy bread or coffee when I can from a bakery on my way. The first month, I was walking about 20 minutes, but now that I have changed sites, I take a bus. Sometimes I walk halfway and take a taxi from there. I stay until around noon or later...this is flexible depending on the department I am in or the procedure that is happening. There is never a problem staying later. There are also opportunities to do 12 or 24 hour shifts, which I have only done once. After work, I usually walk home and then I take my siesta! I have really gotten accustomed to this practice. Shops and restaurants close for the most part as well, so it makes sense. After nap, I usually shower and go out for a walk, a coffee, etc. Sometimes I take a book and read or work on my homework. I am usually home to make dinner around 7 or 8 pm and am up either surfing the net, chatting on facebook, more homework, etc. I don't tend to get to bed until pretty late, around midnight. I find that weekends are the time to do more of the heavy exploring and outings. There are some beautiful parts of the city to just walk around, museums, shops and restaurants. I think if you are not a napping person, like I am, then it would be just as easy to do some exploring mid-week as well. There is a pretty busy night life and people are out late...a lot of people, all the time. I have found work-life balance to be really nice here.

Housing: What is your living situation like? Knowing what you know now, are there other options you would have chosen instead? If you can provide some resources for future interns, that would be most helpful.

I live with 3 others - a woman, her daughter & niece. Her mother was here the first 2 weeks, and then she went back to her hometown. She lives here on and off throughout the year. The mother works and the girls attend school. I live very near downtown, near everything so that is nice. I think if I had to choose again, I would have chosen to live with a student. I think overall, I would have been more comfortable just being more on my own and independent. I am the type of person who is friendly and

outgoing. Because my host family is not, it has made it a bit harder. I would recommend that students evaluate their personalities well and whether or not you are ok being on your own or if you need the comfort of a family. With that being said, it is not a guarantee that your host family will be as warm and welcoming as you expect. I think that personally, I would have been ok with spending more alone time and been confident of my ability to make friends and other connections through work. I would also recommend that students not be shy about communicating with the program if there are any concerns or needs. Once I did that, the response that I received was wonderful and supportive. I know that had my concerns not been resolved, that I would have had the opportunity to change my living arrangements without a problem.

REVISION

It is so interesting to look back at my writing only a few short weeks ago. This experience has been amazing and each week was not only a different challenge, but a new time to reflect and re-evaluate. As I write this from Portland, after having left Argentina a bit over a week ago, I can truly say that I miss my host family! I had an interesting and very unique experience I think. I am grateful that I experienced it this way and had the ability to be challenged in the various ways that I was. Another US student came to live with us and the house dynamics really took a weird turn! Ultimately, I grew very close to my host family. I think opting for living with a student may have been the more “comfortable” and “easier” living situation, but I am really glad for the time I had to spend with this particular family and the friendships that I made. I learned much more about myself and my ability to represent myself and my country in a positive way.

Finances: How is your budget working out for you? Are you spending more or less than what you expected? How much do you typically spend on food, recreation, travel, etc.? What would you do differently knowing what you know now?

Budgeting has worked out well. I am spending more on food than I expected. It is cheaper to eat out, but it does add up, just like in the states. I am a person that really likes to drink a café con leche outside the house and this adds to my expenses. It has become a habit of mine. Coffee is around \$2, a few pieces of bread such as croissants \$1, dinner can range between \$5 and \$10. Some days if I eat empanadas, I can spend only \$2 on my meal. On average, I would say I spend anywhere between \$5 to \$10 dollars a day. Museums are free on Wednesdays so I take advantage of that! I paid \$9 for a city tour. I have spent a few hundred on travel and gifts so far as well. A bus ticket to Mendoza, about 12 hours away was \$80 round trip and I paid \$10 a night to stay in a hostel, which included breakfast.

Travel and Transportation: How do you typically get around town and to work? Are you satisfied with that choice? Would you recommend other options? Do you have time to explore the surrounding area on time off? How do you manage that? What do you recommend for travel options? Where do you recommend exploring?

I either walk, take the bus or a taxi. I am happy with this as it is a nice walk, usually only 20-30 minutes. A one way bus ride is \$.53 and a taxi to work is about \$2 one way. Any of these options are great. I do have time to explore on my time off. If I want more time during the day, I skip my siesta. I feel that my schedule has not been too rigorous. I am taking 12 credits through my university, so I do have to manage my homework time, but I generally do this at night. I think that taking the Omni buses for travel is a great choice. They are comfortable, affordable and they go everywhere. Carlos Paz is the nearest city, only 40 minutes away. Villa General Belgrano is a quaint little town with hiking and cute little shops. They also have one of the most important Oktoberfests if students are here during that time of year...I wouldn't miss it. I went to Mendoza, which is beautiful. It is wine country and there are great tours. Also, just the various museums and cathedrals right here in Cordoba are amazing! There is a tourist center near the main plaza in town that will give you a complete low-down on everything to do and see. I hope to also see Buenos Aires and Iguazu if I can before I leave.

Professional: How well did your coursework prepare you for your internship? What knowledge of your field has been most important so far?

I believe that my coursework has prepared me well, although it has been a while since I completed my year of Anatomy and Physiology! It has really been wonderful to see patients and observe surgeries and recall things that I learned about and studied in textbooks. I have been able to recognize anatomy and various disease processes, etc. in various settings and departments. I feel like I have a pretty good grasp of what is going on and especially in order to ask appropriate questions. I would most likely have felt lost had I not had a year of A & P. Of course, my coursework in Spanish has prepared me well and has been essential!

Cross Cultural: Describe an event where you misunderstood something due to cultural differences. What did you do? What would you do next time?

While drinking mate in a group, it is customary for one person to add the water and pass the mate around in order of the circle. After the person offers and you accept, apparently once you no longer want to participate and have had your fill, you say "thank you". Of course, I am used to saying thank you all the time, and I found myself being skipped over and was a bit confused. I asked my host sister about it later and she told me all about the "rules".

What I think I would have done differently would have been to let the group or person know that it was first time drinking mate, and I'm sure that way they would have been a bit more aware that I was a 'newbie' and to explain things to me so that it would be more clear.

Personal: What are the most important things you have learned about yourself thus far through this experience?

I have learned very much about my ability to be independent and patient in an environment that can be very unfamiliar and even uncomfortable. I have learned that I am much more outgoing than I ever thought I could be. I have learned that I can thrive under pressure and overcome obstacles. I have also learned that I need some time alone each day in order to help me destress. And I have also learned about how much I love to work in medicine and help people!