

Beyond

The ISI Florence & Umbra Institute
Studies in International Education

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Giampiero Bevagna

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Alexandra Garey

Jan Kieling

Christine Staton

Alessio Surian

Christian Tarchi

Adrienne Ward

Design and layout

Nina Peci

Contacts

E-mail: npeci@isiflorence.org

www.isiflorence.org | www.umbra.org

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Explore What Interests You

Alexandra Garey

The best advice that I can give is to explore what interests you.

With my dual degree in Italian Literature and European Studies, I pursued American “startup” life. I currently work at a water company with the very Italian name of “Bevi”. Here I work in logistics and supply chain. I have no background experience at all in this field. However, start-ups provide wonderful opportunities to learn and grow in new roles. At Bevi, we provide tech-based water coolers to offices across the country. The hope is to have a positive impact on the world by reducing the number of plastic water bottles in work and leisure environments. Businesses and facilities have found sustainable and financial benefits from having our Bevi machines in their offices. It has been interesting to see the stages of the product life cycle as we expand into new businesses and endeavor into new markets. But how did I get here?

In high school I always enjoyed Italian class and was fascinated by world history. Through that, I determined that I wanted to go in to some type of international field i.e., working for the United Nations or European Union.

As I grew more familiar with the responsibilities of these roles and requirements, I knew I wasn’t up to par with the quality of knowledge and language proficiency that was necessary.

I decided to pursue a different path. After finishing a majority of my credits for both college majors in two years, I had the opportunity to study abroad to cap off my degree. I rightly chose ISI in Florence.

My time abroad was well spent and the location was well chosen. The subject matter, the teachers, and the location were paramount to my growth and development. I find myself still connecting with strangers or colleagues in business meetings about my time in Italy. Only a week ago, I spoke with our new HR manager about Hadrian’s legacy and my

time at his villa on my birthday weekend. While on the bus commuting to Manhattan, I've chatted with a high school friend about all the places he should see in Rome and Florence. I shared my favorite Florentine restaurant dishes and locations. (Trattoria al Trebbio, *crespelle alla fiorentina* and *pappa al pomodoro*). Just yesterday, I spoke with a stranger at my favorite bookstore in Manhattan, Strand, about Boccaccio's *Decameron*...

After graduating from college, I did a business program in Northern Italy where I worked with a family-owned company. I was able to apply my invaluable experience while in Florence to this new opportunity.

While I'm uncertain where I'll be in five to ten years, I can say that keeping an open mind, pursuing my interests, and remaining curious have led me to where I am today. I loved Italy and although it hasn't brought me directly to my current position, it developed the foundation for all that I've accomplished so far. While abroad, I was able to explore new locations both with new friends and alone. This included soccer games in Milan and Rome, the Lamborghini factory and showroom, Ferrari's Maranello, the city of Genoa, the *biscotti* in Prato, and many new and unique places.

I was able to follow my curiosity and build my independence. Studying abroad helped shape me into the person I am today, and I can't encourage it enough.

My time in Italy was invaluable and I look forward to the time I can return.

Re-Adapting and Re-Integrating: Life After Study Abroad

Christine Staton

We were prepared to go. Between advisors, orientations, and meeting with alumni, we were over-prepared for arriving in Florence. I was made aware of the differences in culture such as tipping, greeting, and meal times. I knew which museums I wanted to visit, and which cities I wanted to travel to and when. I even searched the Palazzo Rucellai and the Palazzo Bargagli on Google Maps and practiced walking through Florence to go in between the buildings. To say the least, I knew what to expect when leaving for Italy.

I was not prepared to return home. ISI Florence provided a great resource: a workshop on reverse culture shock. We talked about what to expect when we returned to our families and how to combat the effects of reverse culture shock. That combined with the support from my family and friends helped my transition back into life as a resident of New Jersey. My jet-lag slowly faded, my sleep schedule found a pattern again, and I fought off the blues from missing Florence. What has been harder to re-adjust to, however, are the things to which I became attached in Florence and the culture of my home university.

My family spent Christmas Eve at my uncle Tom's house. Thoughtfully, Uncle Tom bought prosciutto, mozzarella, and sweet red wine for me because he knew they were my favorites. One sip of the wine and I almost spit it out and with one bite of the mozzarella wrapped in prosciutto, I nearly cried. I realized all that I had become attached to in Florence--Chianti, fresh cheeses, and raw prosciutto di Parma--was either unavailable or inaccessible in New Jersey.

Even so, my study abroad experience taught me to be brave and never get discouraged. When I missed drinking Chianti, I drove to the local bottle shop and asked about their collection of Italian reds. To my de-

light, the store carried my favorite: Vignamaggio Mona Lisa. Then, when I craved raw prosciutto, I asked the butcher to sample his selection and found a brand that was similar (not perfect, but close enough) to what I enjoyed in Florence. I even asked around and found the grocery store with the best cheese selection. Not only did I return home with new tastes and preferences, but I now have a determination to make myself feel at home anywhere.

The idea of “home” for me has changed drastically. I felt just as at home in Florence as I do at my home university or walking through my hometown. So now when I think of home--that is, a place where I feel comfortable, loved, and safe--there comes to mind a place which is a combination of both places. At this new home, I can watch my favorite American television shows while enjoying fresh-made spaghetti and pesto and I can catch-up with American friends on a leisurely walk through campus. Walking was one of my favorite activities in Florence, but back on campus, it is just one of the difficulties I have faced.

My home university, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, is so large that even driving in between our campuses takes up to fifteen to twenty minutes. I could walk across Florence in the same amount of time! Add the cold weather to the equation and walking is out of the question. Not only is this, but the campus I left four months ago is not the campus to which I have returned. When I returned to Rutgers University, I moved into an unfamiliar part of campus, started working with new and different people, and did not see my friends from ISI Florence, people that I saw every day, at all. Rutgers had changed and while I changed as well, it was in a different way and for different reasons. I have been back in school for a month and I am just now feeling like I have adjusted and can get comfortable again. Interestingly, this is approximately the same amount of time that it took to adjust to life in Florence. So, while it has been challenging, it clearly is possible and this is what I have learned from both of these experiences.

Change is hard. In the last year I have changed my country of residence twice and I have faced cultural shock three times (including a va-

cation to London after the semester ended). As hard as it may be, it is possible to get through a period of inconsistency as a stronger and wiser person. Studying abroad taught me not just how to adjust to new situations, but how to adapt to them--to new languages, cultures, customs, and cities--and how to thrive in them; how to find your best self in each situation and accept the changes as a part of your own growth and maturity.

Transitioning back into American life has been as hard as it was transitioning into Italian life. I do not know what that says about each culture, but it does say a lot about me and my experience at ISI Florence. I was able to integrate so fully into Italian life that I must now do the same in my own native country. From this I know that with time, effort, and patience I can find my best self here again and thrive even more. Study abroad taught me to adapt, adjust, and integrate into every environment in which I find myself and nothing else could have done the same.