Study abroad is a life-changing experience. The statement has become such a cliché that we forget how deeply inscribed those experiences are. Spending time studying abroad can affect our choice of career, our choice of friends—our choices of where and how we will live our lives. Some study abroad programs have an impact well beyond the students who participate: to the recipients of their enthusiasm and service abroad and to those in the home community who hear the results. IU Southeast’s Summer in Ecuador program, which has completed its 11th year, is a case in point.

In 2001 Magdalena Herdoíza-Estévez conceived a program for IU Southeast education students built around two weeks of intense activity in Ecuador. Students had preparation ahead of time and reports and presentations afterwards. They earned three credits towards their degrees. In Ecuador, students studied history and culture. They also taught classes, worked in communities, and lived with local host families. Getting outside school walls, they came to know and work in a world very different from southern Indiana.

Over the years, the stay in Ecuador has increased from two to three weeks. Students from other IU campuses and other universities have participated, and the program has expanded from education majors to include students studying English, business, criminal justice, sociology, communications, and Spanish, to name a few. The original two Ecuadorian partner schools, América Latina
School and Quitumbe, are still part of the program, and a new partner, the Bicentenario Municipal School, has joined the project. What began as just a brief side trip became an enduring relationship that was to pull in all of the IU Southeast campus.

The course begins with nine meetings in May to sort out logistics and fundraising, to master basic information about Ecuador’s culture and education system, and to prepare lessons that the study abroad students will teach in Ecuador. The group travels to Quito in June. There students settle in with host families, teach English language, health, and (new last year) informatics at the partner schools, participate in debriefing seminars, conduct research, and visit cultural sites. Though surrounded by Spanish speakers in Quito, participants are not required to speak the language. “The new learning environments need to unsettle our students just enough,” Herdoíza-Estévez explained. “We want them to experience the discomfort of not being able to communicate easily; this places them in a position to understand and empathize with immigrant students and families in the United States.”

The major service learning projects take place in Paquibug-San Gerardo, a Quichua village of 500 in the mountains four hours south of Quito, within sight of Chimborazo, the highest mountain in Ecuador and in the entire equatorial region. The first visit was included early on to provide a chance for students to see an indigenous village. When they arrived, they were greeted by a parade of residents waving tree branches and banners. The IU Southeast group realized that a longer-term commitment was in order. In yearly visits since then, the IUS group has helped plant trees and painted murals in the classrooms. They have done storytelling projects and health care education. Over the years, they have provided books, musical instruments, lamps for the classroom, teaching supplies, a sewing machine; the list goes on. The IU Southeast campus contributed a complete computer lab to the community, the only state-of-the-art lab in the region.

When the IUS visitors learned that only one woman in San Gerardo still knew how to make shigras (bags made of natural fibers and colored dyes), they helped to set up a training program and a market. The teachers at the local school, members of the majority culture of the country, were always included in activities, and as they watched the interactions, they began to think of the Quichua language not as something to replace with Spanish, but something that should be preserved alongside Spanish. They are beginning to encourage grandmothers to speak Quichua to their grandchildren.

The most recent group included computer science and informatics students for the first time. At a debriefing session last August, the presence of these techies was a hot topic. Most had no teaching experience or training. Herdoíza-Estévez observed how surprised the computer science majors had been when they saw young children and their teachers in the mountain village working with computers. One computer science student commented, “They put their resources to uses I never would have considered. PowerPoint became a way to do math exercises. They don’t have an idea of how computers are used elsewhere, so they have used their imaginations and envisioned games to teach the younger kids. They are already thinking like programmers.”

“IT’S NOT ONLY WHAT THEY LEARN, BUT WHAT THEY TEACH, WHAT SERVICE THEY PERFORM, WHAT EXCITEMENT THEY CONVEY BOTH ABROAD AND AT HOME, AND WHAT THEY DO WITH THE KNOWLEDGE FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIVES.”

—Magdalena Herdoíza-Estévez
Advisor to the computer science group) Joseph Hollingsworth (see sidebar) said, “All five students discovered that they are truly passionate about computing. They realized this when they were in the Ecuadorian classrooms. They saw themselves deeply wanting their students to learn the material and get the thrill of seeing a computer do what you program it to do.” Said one major when asked about what he valued most about the trip, “I hope that maybe something I said might have influenced one of the kids, at least, and geared them to computer programming, or some field related to my field.”

Six years ago, the summer program began professional development programs for the teachers in Quito; since that time IUS has delivered units on ESL teaching, special education, and assessment. The U.S. embassy in Ecuador sponsors internships that bring Ecuadorian teachers to New Albany for three weeks of consultation with IUS students and faculty, and observations and presentations in local schools.

At the debriefing session in August, students learned that the “summer” program they signed up for would keep them busy for a long time to come. Gloria Murray, mentor to the education students, cautioned, “Things don’t end today. Once you are in this program, you are in it for life.” There followed sign-up sessions for meeting with Quito teachers visiting IUS, for a 50th-anniversary Sister-Cities celebration between Quito and Louisville, for talking to students in various IUS departments, for visiting high schools and elementary schools in the area. Sign-up sheets filled quickly.

In building a paper computer, students pay attention to all the parts of the real thing. Students at the Bolivar Chiriboga School in Paquilbug-San Gerardo caught on quickly to how these tools—new to their lives—can be used.

One of the first things IUS students do for their summer course is raise funds. The funds are sent to Ecuador, where school supplies are purchased. The IUS students package the supplies and present them during their visit to San Gerardo.
So far, 126 students have been part of the IUS Summer in Ecuador program. Each year alumni go back. “One is now teaching at our partner school for the fourth time,” Herdoíza-Estévez said. When the IU Southeast campus held a celebration for the 10th anniversary of the program, every annual cohort was represented. The connections were not just on one side, however. Several Ecuadorian teachers paid their own way to attend that celebration.

The program’s impact spreads across places and time. Greg Smedley, who was part of the program in 2005, speaks for many of the participants: “The lessons I learned on this trip about acceptance, cultures, and diversity will forever impact who I am as a person and as an educator. This was one of the most profound learning experiences of my life.” Debbie Zehnder had the opportunity to go to college for the first time when she was in her 40s. She was part of the Ecuador program in 2004 and 2005, and now teaches in rural southern Indiana: “I am committed to teaching my students acceptance and inclusiveness through the study of the Spanish language and Latin American culture. I place great emphasis on the value we each bring to the world, in my role to help them become proactive, global citizens.”

Just about anyone who has been on a study abroad program knows that being in and exploring a new place is at least as important as taking courses there. The Summer in Ecuador Program began with that recognition and has expanded. Herdoíza-Estévez explained, “It’s not only what they learn, but what they teach, what service they perform, what excitement they convey both abroad and at home, and what they do with the knowledge for the rest of their lives.”
Participant Comments from the 2012 Debriefing

The reason I got into education is that I wanted to change the world. I wanted to help kids grow into productive citizens, and I wanted to leave my mark. And now it’s bigger than that. It’s not just me doing it for them but also them working in me. It’s more of a relationship.
—Lauren Skarda

This was my first time teaching with a language and culture barrier. I’ve never been to a foreign country like this. I only speak English. I walked into a room at San Gerardo, and one little girl just clung to me the whole time. I couldn’t talk to her so much, but we interacted without words. I will remember that, and I will miss her forever.
—Amanda Taylor

If you need to do something, you can do it. If you need to climb the stairs of the Basilica, you can do it. If you sprain your ankle on Day 4, you’re going to make it. Every time there was a challenge, we met it and we kept going.
—Erin Cook

I knew that nothing lasts forever; I learned that there is beauty in that. When we were at the school on our last day, we were all sad. It was so bittersweet that it wasn’t going to last forever. On the other hand, there were moments when things weren’t going well in the classroom and I was thinking “Thank god this doesn’t last forever!” There were moments when I was sick and on the bus and was so glad knowing that this is not lasting forever. There were moments when I wanted to be with my host family forever. We need to enjoy and accept that this isn’t going to be forever.
—Lauren Skarda

Summer in Ecuador Instructors and Advisors
Magdalena Herdoíza-Estévez, IU Southeast Professor of Education, New Neighbors Project Director
Gloria Murray, Dean, IU Southeast School of Education, Associate Professor of Education
Joseph E. Hollingsworth, IU Southeast Professor of Computer Science
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Margarita Bustillos, Quitumbe
Johanna Ramírez, Bicentenario

Program website:
http://homepages.ius.edu/MHERDOIZ/pages/summerinecuador.htm

Video of the 2012 Cohort:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17Fce84RbCs

See also: Magdalena Herdoíza-Estévez, Study Abroad in Higher Education: Building Global Citizens and Intercultural Leaders (Linus Publications, 2011)
After his return with the Summer group, Joe Hollingsworth had only a few weeks at home before he headed back to Quito for the fall 2012 semester. Based at the University of San Francisco Quito (USFQ) on a Fulbright Scholar grant, he was there at a time when Ecuador was taking drastic action to improve university-level training. Last spring, government officials closed down 14 universities (serving 38,000 students) that did not meet basic academic standards. There are plans to build four new universities and to establish standards that will apply throughout the country.

Hollingsworth was on leave from the IU Southeast Center for Teaching and Learning, which he has directed for two years. Colleagues at USFQ tapped into that experience in their efforts to design course and degree assessment programs. He was also asked about the design of twenty-first century classrooms—with online course management and flipped teaching. “Online course management can be developed for free with open source applications, and these applications can help flip a classroom, so that traditional classroom business (lectures and the like) is provided ahead of time via software and Web tools, allowing instructors to devote more class time to individual issues,” Hollingsworth explained.

At USFQ, Hollingsworth studied how Ecuadorian students deal with computing courses, which too often “slaughter” U.S. students, whose fail rates in introductory courses can reach 60 percent. “I gathered data on how Ecuadorian students respond to computing pedagogy, and I hope to incorporate the lessons I learn from that into what we do at IU Southeast.”

Finally, after the success of the initial computer science study abroad team, Hollingsworth plans to take a group every other year on the Summer in Ecuador project. During his time in Quito last fall, he built closer relationships with partner schools. All this progressed as he worked to master Spanish, to find challenging bike routes, and to settle into life at almost 10,000 feet above sea level. You can read the story of his stay in his blog, “Joe’s Excellent Adventure” (joeecuador.blogspot.com).