Students Gain Maturity in New Overseas Program in Dublin

The summer of 1999 was the first year that Indiana University students were able to choose Dublin, Ireland for study abroad courses taught at the prestigious Trinity College. The program is offered through the Office of Overseas Study (OVST) in co-sponsorship with the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES), a national agency of which IU is a member. Selection and orientation for this program are done at IU. There were more than 20 IU students among the group that spent six weeks at the IES Center at Trinity College, Dublin, earning 6 credits toward their majors. Below, two of these students share their enthusiasm and impressions of their first experience abroad.

Mary J. Becklenberg, now a junior majoring in anthropology and minoring in theatre, was drawn to the program because of her strong interest in the theatre. One of the courses she took was Contemporary Irish Drama where she became "hooked" on the writings of Brian Friel, Ireland's most prominent contemporary playwright, joining the Irish in the tremendous pride they take in their writers. By going early and staying with distant relatives (with good Irish names like Donahoe and Connolly, of course!), she had a chance to get a glimpse of the country and its culture even before starting her studies. When not studying, she and her fellow Americans would pool their resources and explore the countryside by bus, train, and ferry, staying in economical hostels and forming bonds of friendship among themselves and other young Irish. She learned to appreciate the many cultural subtexts present in Irish society, realizing that even a simple thing as referring to the city as Londonderry or Derry could carry inadvertent and unintended meaning. The course on Irish history, covering the years 1846-1921, gave her some historical context for sorting out the issues that divide as well as unite Ireland. She concludes, "It is not for us to condemn nor condone but only to understand why either side can't seem to give in."

The intensive summer experience had a phenomenal effect on Becklenberg: "As was guaranteed, I can honestly say that this experience overseas was one of the most enriching times that I have encountered in my education thus far. By illuminating a different culture, people, and lifestyle, it opened my eyes to different aspects of myself, my own culture, and the world in which we live." Since returning to IUB, her personal motto has become, "Keep My Experience Alive!"

"I want other students to know how vital it is to study overseas!"

—Leslie Tyler
IUB marketing and international business major

IUB students Leslie Tyler (left) and Julie Au pose before one of the typical Celtic stone crosses that dot the countryside.
For Leslie Crawford Tyler, a senior from Fort Wayne enrolled in the Kelley School of Business, going to Ireland was also her first trip abroad, something her father had always encouraged her to do before graduating. Although she first wanted to go to London, she finally chose Ireland because it sounded like a good and new opportunity, even though she didn’t know much about the country. She was amazed at how much she learned, so much more than she ever remembers learning about the United States. She praised the courses and her professors as being highly professional. What she really liked was the close fit between what students learned in the classroom and their field trips outside of class. For example, reading Joyce’s *The Dubliners* in her Irish literature course was later reinforced through “walking historical tours” of the town, in which costumed actors performed in the very same locations described in the book, a form of “speaking the book.” Of course, Joyce is commemorated like this every year in Dublin, but Tyler could not imagine anything comparable in American culture where such homage is paid to its writers.

Tyler also took a trip to Belfast in Northern Ireland, a totally different and politicized environment where she was a bit taken aback to see how even local neighborhood playgrounds were painted with the colors and symbols of particular religious sects and how abundant were the militant, political murals painted on public buildings as well as on homes. But she had been somewhat prepared for this because her literature class had discussed the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants and the stubborn positions of both sides. Yet she did not feel uncomfortable at all in Belfast. Being there and learning about such problems gave her a new perspective. She said, “I definitely think that I have changed and learned to empathize; I feel I am much more adaptable and patient than before.”

Like Becklenberg, Tyler is enthusiastic: “I feel like I really bonded there; it’s a beautiful country, the people are wonderful, I had a lot of fun, and I just feel like I now have a second home. When you are so immersed abroad, you really feel connected.” This new perspective has opened up her mind to considering wider career possibilities internationally. It has even given her the confidence to contemplate learning a foreign language, something that she had never felt comfortable about doing before this experience. Both students have been eager to interest others because, as Tyler put it so unequivocally, “I want other students to know how vital it is to study overseas!”

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—Mary Becklenberg
IUB anthropology major