

After two years of studying on campus at Illinois State and having some of the best experiences for the preparation of my teaching career, I knew I wanted to do something to take my knowledge a step further. Back in high school, I traveled abroad for a choir tour to the UK and I fell in love with meeting new people and experiencing different places and cultures. Knowing this, I decided to apply for a study abroad opportunity to Heredia, Costa Rica through the College of Education, and I did not regret one minute of it.

Over the course of the two-week trip, each day was filled with new learning opportunities. We visited 5 different schools which were very different from each other. They ranged from public to private, and from rural to urban settings. Upon arrival, we were guided through the school on a tour and given room assignments for our observations. After spending some time in the classrooms, ISU students conducted an activity with a chosen class from the school that day. For this activity, each ISU student was given 2-4 Costa Rican students to work with. Though I only had some basic Spanish skills, I learned so much about communication through language barriers, and what an educator can do to help a child understand or succeed, even if they don't speak that child's primary language. As I continue to earn my ESL endorsement, I know I will forever remember the experiences I had as a linguistic minority. I will use them to construct and have supports in place for my future students in my classroom.

When we were not visiting schools, our group had the opportunity to see some of Costa Rica's greatest treasures. Our first trip was a weekend in Manuel Antonio, where I got to see the Pacific Ocean for the first time. A small group of us went walking through the Manuel Antonio National Park, where we saw waterfalls, monkeys, sloths, crabs, and so many different species of plants. It was amazing to just walk through the jungle and to take everything in. This trip is where I also grew closer with my ISU trip mates, and I truly believe I made some lifelong friends. There were other excursions we went on, such as a day trip to the Irazú volcano and the city of Cartago, and a day trip to Tirimbina. The Irazú volcano lies just northeast of Heredia and towers over the valley at over 11,000 feet. Seeing the craters and feeling the sand and ash at the top of the volcano was an experience I will never forget. We then visited an iconic Catholic Church in Cartago where thousands pilgrimage to every year on August 2nd. This church was breathtaking and was a humbling moment in our day. Our day trip to Tirimbina was my favorite excursion, as we learned about the process of making chocolate, all the way from the cacao fruit, to the tasting chocolate we know and love. American chocolate does not begin to compare to the chocolate in Costa Rica, and I was so happy to take some of it home with me!

I could not have had any of these experiences without the help of the Jepsen scholarship. I am very thankful to have been chose to receive that scholarship so that I was able to not only grow as an educator and student, but also as a human being. I cannot wait to see how this trip positively impacts the ways in which I teach and interact with students, families, and communities in the future.

Pura Vida!

Madeleine Ferguson

Elementary Education - Class of 2020



The view from the beach in Manuel Antonio, looking out to the Pacific Ocean!

Below is a picture of our ISU group with the main crater at the Irazú Volcano!



Making and tasting the organic Costa Rican chocolate! Mmmmmm...

