

Studying abroad in Costa Rica was an experience that has been unforgettable and I would have never imagined myself completing during my time at Illinois State. The urge to study abroad was brought to me after seeing a few of my friends share their study abroad experiences via social media, as well as the various opportunities this program would provide to me. After completing two years of classes at Illinois State toward my degree in Special Education, I have learned so much about diversity in the classroom and meeting the needs of all learners and this opportunity would help enhance my skills in this outlet of the classroom.

While in Costa Rica I was not only exposed to the culture through the educational systems, but also through my time living with a host family and exploring the country. During my stay we made two weekend excursions to Monteverde and Manuel Antonio, which also allowed me to receive a variety of opportunities through out this entire country and view different areas of Costa Rica's geography. Monteverde introduced me to various rural cultures of Costa Rica and the rare opportunity to visit a cloud forest, which homes various species of plants, animals, and birds. While in Monteverde our group had the additional experience of zip lining through the cloud forest! In Manuel Antonio I was able to enjoy the breath taking beaches and explore the various shops and wild life that was literally hanging out of the trees. One whole day in Manuel Antonio was spent exploring the Manuel Antonio national forest that was filled with beaches, waterfalls, hiking travels, and wildlife. Aside from these two planned excursions, our Illinois State group also enjoyed discovering downtown Heredia near our home stays by visiting different shops, touring coffee factories, eating at various restaurants, celebrating the championship fútbol victory, and visiting the local mall. The variety of diversity I was exposed to in these settings was unbelievable, especially overcoming the language barrier and gaining helpful insights to take into my future classroom.

During my short two-week stay in Costa Rica, I was able to visit five different schools through out the country. These schools included a variety of demographics such as rural, urban, private, public, and various grade levels. During these school visits I was able to receive a tour of the school by an administrator or faculty member giving us assorted information that made each school unique. After the tour I was able to pick several classrooms to observe the different teaching styles, practices, and philosophies being used. After my observation the whole Illinois State group met back at one specific classroom where we completed an activity with the students of the school. During our activity we were able to individually work with small groups of children allowing us to get to know them and the activities they enjoyed. During the course of my school visits I focused my observations on the special education system that was in place and integration in the classrooms. From my observations and interactions in the schools I gained helpful insights on different practices used, curriculum options, and classroom organization I will use in my future classroom.

One of the biggest impacts I am taking away from this experience is the feeling of being in a completely new setting that is different than your home and having a communication barrier. Being an education major all of your students are unique and that may mean coming from various backgrounds and having English as

their second language. Being able to experience the minority feelings of a different culture has allowed me to gain various techniques to relate to these students and defeat the overwhelming experience. In addition specializing in special education, many students become over stimulated when their surroundings change or a routine is broken. Traveling and living in a foreign country has given me the experience of being in a place that is out of my element. Facing this first hand has given me coping strategies to introduce to my future students and a variety of resources to utilize amongst my students. Overall this experience has been one of a lifetime. I have made countless memories, done things I would have never imagined doing before, and gained new information that will shape my future day-to-day living and teaching skills.

To conclude I am very grateful and humble that I was awarded the Jepsen Scholarship to help enable me embark on this journey and further not only my education, but also my future impact in the classroom. This has been a journey that will have a positive impact not only on myself, but also my future students, their families, and colleagues.

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When I first arrived in Costa Rica with my host mom (mama tica).



During our tour of Manuel Antonio National Forest



A picture taken while zip lining through the cloud forest.



This is a picture taken while I was completing an activity with a few students.



One of the beautiful beaches in Manuel Antonio with the Costa Rica flag.