

The Benefits of Taking a Gap Year

National Security Language Initiative
for Youth Scholarship

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SUMMER MONTHS

This is my fourth month in South Korea and it is hard to believe that by the end of December, I will have spent half the year overseas. I spent my summer living with a host family in Seoul, the country's capital, and taking an intensive six week language course with thirty seven other scholarship recipients. We were lucky enough to be on the Seoul National University main campus while we were engaged in our language studies. It was an immensely multicultural, open environment. While we were not officially enrolled in any of the university classes, we interacted with the students in the foreign language center on a daily basis.



The best part of it all was that a large number people at the center did not actually speak English. You could hear people speaking Japanese, Spanish, French, and Thai—or see posters in Italian, Arabic, and German. If I wanted to talk to someone, the chances were that I would be using Korean or the Spanish I learned in high school. One of the most memorable parts of my time in Seoul was when a few of us took a campus friend out to lunch. He did not know English but we took turns speaking in French and Korean getting to know each other over fresh dumplings; as it turned out, he was actually a diplomat from Burkina Faso. It's amazing to see how small the world becomes once you begin to learn an extra language or two.



http://www.snu.ac.kr/withsnu/with0101_view.jsp?idx=12912

NEW LIFE



I have since moved to Incheon and am currently a high school exchange student at Bakmun Girl's High School with two other program members. Each class has roughly thirty students where we study music, Japanese, geography, art, and other "typical" classes together. In addition to normal core classes, I am also learning the Gaeyaguem (Korean traditional harp) and Taekyun (traditional Korean grappling martial art) outside of school.

During school breaks, I spend a lot of time with the members of my host family; this has irreversibly changed my status from an only child to one of six kids. In August, I celebrated Chuseok, the Korean equivalent of Thanksgiving, and visited my extended host family in the countryside. I spent most of my time there learning how to harvest different foods and make rice cakes from scratch. I didn't always dig up the biggest sweet potato but it was a new experience to say the least; the company and scenery served as an added bonus.



Sometimes, the sixteen remaining exchange students and I are even able to travel together despite the fact that we are scattered around the country. This adds much to the cultural experience we get outside of the home and school life. This October we visited Jeju, a small island south of the mainland peninsula, to tackle "Hallasan"—the highest mountain in South Korea.

SHOCK AND RECOVERY

As half of my family is Korean, I have had exposure to the language and culture my whole life, but it was still quite a shock to find myself immersed in a Korean high school setting. Uniforms, stricter rules, heavier class loads, and six day school weeks are parts of a Korean student's life that I was aware of, but unable to understand, *to empathize* with until I experienced it firsthand. Realizing this difference, I now also wonder how much knowledge I can practically apply in other areas such as the hard sciences. People always say that knowledge is power but in my mind experience can be even stronger.

What's more is that I believe that the less grandiose parts of my stay here are actually one of the most rewarding parts of my study abroad. The culture shock, the loneliness, the anxiety, and most of all the frustration that comes with miscommunication were painfully honest but constructive revelations in both my academic and personal endeavors. Being away from home and all its distractions often leaves me with a silent place to reflect upon myself and mature more than I believe I could have in my first year of college. I am no longer a high school senior on the verge of burning out and settling for who I thought I was or the extent to which I thought I could accomplish. Every day I find myself exploring old interests through newer venues—for instance, I never thought my first Japanese class would be taught in Korean—or stumbling upon new passions that mold together a greater, more challenging course of study for the future. The hardships I've endured these past months, ones I have never faced before, were a splash of cold water that threw me out of the rut of boredom and monotony I acquired during my own version of “the senior slump”.



Sometimes people asked me why I took a year abroad for language studies if I wanted to be an engineer—after all, a year off from school meant forgetting all your physics and calculus, right? This made me feel uneasy but I also knew that new challenges and international awareness are important steps towards becoming a successful anything. I still love math and science and am even more excited for attending my first classes at the College of Engineering in Ann Arbor next fall; I am especially interested in the Engineers without Borders organization and their Engineering International Minor program. I also plan on continuing my Korean and Japanese studies at the university and on applying for the research community with a respect for first-hand experience hitting home as well.

SPECIAL THANKS

While I am extremely grateful for taking a gap year and this scholarship to study abroad, I am even more thankful for everyone who has supported me in this endeavor. This includes my family, friends, teachers, mentors, the College of Engineering at the University of Michigan, and the ACE Mentoring community for understanding and encouraging my exploration interests outside the normal bounds of engineering. Participating in ACE was the first truly hands-on, organized mentor program I experienced and I hold a great respect for all the mentors and leaders who make it happen. It took me a few months immersed in a foreign country half way across the world to realize just how important and life changing such experiences are to students. As a final point, as this National Security Language Initiative for Youth scholarship is sponsored by the State Department, I especially thank everyone for their hard work and tax dollars!