

BA STUDENT, TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIP, COLOMBIA

As the international focus of my coursework in political science, economics, and Spanish demonstrates, I have an intense desire to both understand, and increase understanding across cultural and geographic boundaries. For this reason, I am applying for the Fulbright to teach English in Colombia. Though I have never been to Colombia, I fell in love with the country, its people and its culture in a very strange way – by going to Argentina. My love for the five months that I spent studying Spanish, human rights, and education in Buenos Aires is undeniable, but after making friends with several Colombians I began to ponder what could have been had I gone to Colombia. A country that I admittedly knew relatively little about beforehand, I was able to see a side of Colombia that one would not be able to read in the papers. Late nights with Fede, Claudia, and Katya were some of the best I ever had, but it was our talks about life, religion, culture, and politics in Colombia that gave me the idea of studying there, and I have been enamored with the country ever since.

Before arriving in Argentina, I volunteered as a tutor in an after-school program at a local community center for inner-city children called the Police Athletic League. Frequently paired with students who were underperforming by several grade levels, I am no stranger to kids who had "fallen through the cracks" of our education system. Seeing the effort put forth by the teachers and volunteers day in and day out to run this program just to provide a little extra help, when it was so clearly needed, left a lasting impression.

My experience as a tutor led me to National Student Partnerships (NSP), a student-run nonprofit seeking to lend a helping hand to community members in disadvantaged areas. There was a common thread running through the stories of nearly every client's reason for ending up in the NSP office; Past lives of broken homes and abusive parents in downtrodden areas often lead to a lack of ambition in school, drug problems, incarceration, or any myriad of unfortunate events. I worked with crack addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, and convicted murderers - most of them very genuine people that were just dealt a bad hand in life, trying to turn things around. If they needed a job, we would help them find and apply for one; if they were homeless, we found them shelter; and if they were hungry, we helped them through the bureaucracy to apply for public assistance. It was difficult for me, at first, to comprehend the fact that I should ask people, "Would you like me to help fill out that form for you?" to save them the embarrassment of admitting their own illiteracy. The challenge of keeping in mind my position as facilitator and an educator on how to get the things they needed, rather than doing it for them, was one of the hardest lessons I had to learn about the education process.

Argentina, however, was truly what galvanized the importance of education in my mind. With coursework at the University of Buenos Aires about how schools and teachers in economically disadvantaged areas cope with the various difficulties they encounter, I was able to take my theoretical knowledge and use it practically in an internship with La Fundación Equidad Social, a non-profit organization that donates refurbished computers to community centers and underprivileged school districts in hopes of connecting students to modern technology.

The majority of my time was spent going to various schools and evaluating the major economic and social problems facing these institutions and their students based on interviews with administrators and teachers. As every single school I visited was ecstatic to have a real-life English speaker with native fluency in their presence, teachers would drag me to classes and have me speak to their students. I would talk about myself; give them lessons on American slang, and teach about life in America to create a sense of cross-cultural understanding that was absent from children whose only images of the U.S. had come from television and the ubiquitous nature of McDonald's. Upon hearing that I was from Philadelphia, for instance, the immediate reaction of students usually had more to do with whether I had ever met Rocky Balboa than our founding fathers and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. My little lectures would often turn into whole class periods, and I loved it SO much I wanted to give my classes homework for the next time I came in.

This past summer I was afforded the opportunity to study public health in St. Louis, Senegal for five weeks. Though the bulk my time was spent at different medical centers and hospitals, I volunteered with an organization that provides education to orphaned children called "And Taxawu Talibe". The situation of the *Talibe* children is difficult to explain, but suffice it to say that they receive no formal education, and often sleep on the street to escape abuse by their caretaker. And Taxawu Talibe goes out at night searching for these children to bring back to their headquarters so that they can have even a semblance of a home to sleep in. They clothe them, feed them, teach hygiene, and attempt to provide basic education all with very limited financial support.

All of my experiences have provided me with an intense desire to teach, and I believe that ten months teaching English in Colombia would only add to that. While in Colombia, I would take advantage of my time outside the classroom by researching the effect of Colombia's movement towards neoliberalism, as it is imposed both by outside forces (such as the World Bank or IMF) and from within, on the public education system. My research in Argentina was of a very similar nature and provided me with plenty of experience conducting interviews with government officials and school administrators in and around Buenos Aires. The trend towards privatization and decentralization of education is an ongoing process that has transpired in many other South American Countries, Colombia's experience being relatively recent. With a focus on theory and a look into schools themselves, I can draw comparisons between the Colombian and Argentine experience with neoliberalism in respect to education.

Aside from conducting this research, I would also volunteer with a local non-profit that works with underprivileged youth to provide different social services and activities like homework help, food, or even sports. After witnessing the South American fervor for soccer first-hand in Argentina, I think it would be an incredible opportunity to be able to incorporate my own life-long love for the sport into the program in any way I can. Whether it be providing homework help or organizing a team to play soccer, the after school program could be extremely beneficial to the students and any community in which I am placed.

To prepare for whatever the future may bring me in terms of education, I am currently in the process of applying for the Diamond Peer Teachers program, which would enable me to become a teaching assistant in an International Politics class next semester at Temple University. In the future, I plan on applying to Teach for America to teach in a Spanish-speaking district of a major American city. Afterwards, I hope to attend graduate school to earn a joint JD/PhD, where I will focus on human rights law and the international political economy. Upon completion of this, I would love to work for an international non-profit to focus my work on the access to education in Latin America, and eventually teach in a university setting.