

Study Hard, Play Harder: A Study Abroad Philosophy

By Gerard Forte

People have often said to me, "follow your dreams and life will be rewarding." Over the summer I was fortunate to experience one of my many dreams, thanks to a spectacular group of people in the SEEK Program at CSI. The SEEK Program was financially supportive and the staff were compassionate, understanding, and encouraging to me in following my dream.

While many students were soaking up the sun over the summer, I was privileged to study in Thessaloniki, Greece, at the American College of Thessaloniki. The locals also call Thessaloniki "Salonica." It is named after the sister of Alexander the Great. It is the second largest city in Greece. Salonica reveals a mosaic of cultural influences from antiquity to the 14th-century. On most of my strolls around the city, I was able to see some of the many ruins of the former empires. Perhaps, the best way to describe what came to my mind after each sighting was, **WOW** and **unbelievable**.



Salonica is a city full of life, as well as a city that demonstrates importance in religion, mainly Christian Orthodox. Throughout this metropolis, churches could be easily spotted, just about one to every block, or it may have seemed so! Whenever I asked any of the citizens how they would describe the city, most people said, "We are like LA, whereas Athens is like NYC." For me, Salonica is a smaller metropolitan area than NYC, with signs in Greek and people speaking a different language, Greek! Each community offered walking distance to supermarkets, shopping, restaurants, bars, clubs and gyms for a workout addict like me, to which I became a patron.

The American College of Thessaloniki is a small campus that houses about 700 students in a regular semester (with great expectations from its students). The classrooms are modern and equipped with today's technology. The Bissell Library on campus is perhaps the most modern library I have seen in years. Its large tinted windows keep the sun's rays out, while the cathedral-like ceiling offers a sense of space.

My professors were masters in their subject matter. They used a variety of tools to teach the lectures. Because of time constraints during the summer session, we had assignments every day, which I expected, of course. After all, I was there to learn. However, I played even harder.

Everyone looked forward to the weekends, because they were extraordinary. Most weekends, the Student Government took us on field trips. We explored a few Greek Islands where both learning and playing took place. We visited archaeological sites, such as Vergina, where the ruins date back to early civilization. We also traveled to spectacular beaches and swam in the beautiful blue waters of the Aegean and Ionian Seas. Skiathos, one of the beaches we visited, was warm and calm, just like most of the Greek people.

The weekend trips brought students closer to each other. We had study sessions in small and large groups, on the bus and on the beaches. The phrase "learning does not end in the classroom" certainly defined our weekends. I also took advantage of any window of opportunity to speak Greek to the locals.

By the end of the first week, I felt safe and well adjusted to my new environment. With the support of the staff and professors at the college, I was confident all was well. I felt like I was back on the grounds of CSI and in NYC, with only one difference: attempting to speak a new language. Although the language was challenging, it was certainly rewarding with every effort. The classes were taught in English, and I studied "International Relations" as well as "The Idea of Europe."

This knowledge has taught me not only that dreams can unfold but that it can also leave a profound effect on one's life. For me, it has certainly done that. It changed my general outlook of life and of our physical universe, as well as my place in it. This experience has inspired me to search for a deeper meaning of our world, and it has stimulated me to try and understand societies and cultures even more than before. This, I believe, will last for a very long time.

Thank you to my extended family, SEEK staff at CSI, for allowing me to experience one of my many dreams, and most of all, for your support, encouragement and belief in me.