



# Study Abroad Program Offered Unique Learning Experiences for SPS Student

By Rebecca Esparza '99 BBA '03 MBA



**T**wenty-seven year-old Ashley Stephens was sitting in her School of Professional Studies (SPS), formerly ADCaP, class with UIW Director of International Affairs Dr. Javier Lozano when he mentioned the UIW's Study Abroad program. For Stephens, the idea of taking part in immersion studies in another country was intriguing.

"After class, I talked more with him about it and expressed my interest. We continued our discussion and looked into testing out the idea of a non-traditional student taking part in studying abroad," she said.

By September of 2016, Stephens was studying in Austria. She is the first graduate student from UIW's School of Professional Studies to participate in the exchange program with IMC Krems University of Applied Sciences in Austria, a UIW sister school. The university has built an international reputation over the years, with over 2,500 students from all over the world currently studying at the school.

Born and raised in New York City, Stephens is one of eight children. She will complete her graduate degree in organizational development and leadership from UIW by May 2017.

"I was working full time in human resources and made the decision that this was something I needed to do," she explained. "Before this experience, I had never even visited Europe. I am so happy that I now see the bigger picture and I will be able to step out of a situation and give a global perspective."

Stephens noted her five-month study abroad experience has helped her appreciate the opinions and feelings of others more readily.

"When you are sitting in class at UIW and sharing your opinion with fellow U.S. citizens, you hear their point of view but choose to accept or reject it," she said. "The people in class have a stake in their own opinion, but a non-U.S. citizen doesn't. They are sharing what they think from the outside looking in. The view of what is happening overall is better communicated and not filled with personal attachments."

Stephens was attending school in Austria during one of the most controversial times in American history: the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

"Every country I traveled to watched the process with wide eyes," she explained. "In the classroom, I learned how valuable the U.S. economy is in the European world. The whole experience has taught me to think of a world bigger than me, bigger than Americans and see how our actions ultimately affect those around us. Learning to understand this is something that I would not have experienced staying at home."

Stephens added if she had stayed, she never would have been able to be pushed past her own comfort zone and learn how to calmly communicate her own opinion and beliefs. She was also able to visit 12 different European countries during her study abroad experience.

"This is valuable, more than I realize now. As I work on completing my master's degree and re-enter the workforce, I will have to deal with differences of opinions. As a future leader or manager, I will need to be able to listen to the whole story, see the bigger picture and give a global perspective."

Austin Pershing, coordinator of sister school partnerships at UIW, promotes the conversation between UIW and sister school partners, in order to facilitate the information sharing process and maximize study abroad participation.

Pershing noted the benefits of a study abroad program build character and expand the mind.

"It allows an individual to develop traits that they may not otherwise have in a typical classroom environment," she said. "Students are met with social, linguistic, and cultural barriers throughout their immersive experience. Thus, many develop resiliency, boldness, flexibility, and some even develop cross-cultural competence, in addition to learning a new language."

Lozano added students who participate in study abroad programs have a competitive advantage in the workplace and increase their cross-cultural competence that will help them succeed in both their personal and professional lives.

Currently, 20 UIW students are participating in an international experience, Pershing noted.

"We have 11 undergraduate students, three graduate students, and six professional program students. On an annual basis, an average of over 200 members of the UIW community participate in an international experience."

Although there were challenges to overcome, especially being so far away from her friends and family, she would definitely recommend the experience to anyone considering it.

"My advice would be to be certain of what you want from the study abroad experience and go after it," Stephens said. "Prepare to start from scratch and keep an open mind. There is a big difference in what you think you'll experience and what you will actually experience."



Stephens in Old Town Centre, Bratislava, Slovakia.