

Megan Luft

Graduation Year: Junior

College: Science

Major(s): Neuroscience and Behavior

Minors(s): Education, Schooling, and Society

Scholar Group Membership: No

Did you received other funding for this project?: Notre Dame International

Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding? Yes

More details on CUSE funding assistance? If I lacked CUSE funding, in order to participate in my internship I would not have been able to travel around Europe or to do as much in London while abroad. The funding for my internship allowed me to participate in a great professional opportunity while also having the culturally rich study abroad experience that I desired.

Project Title: St. Thomas More Language College Internship in London

Project Location: Chelsea, London, United Kingdom

ND Faculty Mentor: Did not have one

Project Type: Internship

Why did you undertake this project/experience? Deepen your knowledge of a topic or issue, Research/experience necessary for senior thesis or capstone project, Career discernment and/or preparation, Internationalize your Notre Dame experience

Did your funded experience help you:

[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]: Very Much

[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]: Yes

[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]: Very Much

[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]: Very Much

[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]:Yes

Tell us about your experience.

Serving as a learning support assistant (LSA), I worked ten to eleven hours each week. Depending on the day and the week, I was almost always in the classroom assisting either one individual or a group of students with special educational needs. Through my department- the learning support unit, I also spent time with students at lunchtime club and helped them at homework club.

While interning, I was personally involved in the issue of inclusion versus specialized schools or programs for students who need extra help in class, which is currently being debated and heavily researched in the world of education psychology. I started out believing passionately in inclusion, viewing separation as unfair or unjust. But after my time at STMLC, I modified my opinion. I feel that many of the students I often helped in class would have done much better in a special school. It broke my heart to see one student in particular sitting in one of his classes, unable to participate

at all. His being at STMLC, despite his comfort in the community, is an utter waste of his time as a student—just going through the motions, not gaining any of the knowledge or benefits that any other student would. I learned that the debate between inclusion and special education does not have a clear, black and white, objective solution. Rather, it is best to judge each student on a case by case basis, as each student is a unique individual and learner and should be treated as one.

From this experience, I learned more than I could have previously imagined about the United Kingdom. The education system, I have learned, is in many ways directly related to both the church and state, which are well-integrated in the United Kingdom. I find it very interesting that although students are not specifically districted into certain schools based on their neighborhood as they are in the United States, if parents can afford to live in a nice neighborhood that has an excellent state school nearby or can pay tuition for a public (what Americans consider private) school, their children will have a better education, better opportunities later in life, and so on. The system of applying to the schools of your choice, instead of having school districts, is a good one, as competition between schools results in better schools in the end. Still, however, there is educational inequality in the United Kingdom, just as there is in the United States. Schools like STMLC help to bridge this gap in the system. Although located in the posh neighborhood of Chelsea, none of its students come from the area. STMLC prides itself on a system of inclusion—taking in students of all different races, economic backgrounds, and educational ability.

From spending so much time in various classes, I also gained insight to the differences between an American classroom and a British one. In the United Kingdom, the clear purpose of each class in secondary school is to prepare students for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams that they will take at the end of secondary school, before going onto sixth form to complete A-levels, or advanced GCSEs. Because of this system, all academic assessments during secondary school serve to gauge students' progress toward their projected score on the correlating GCSE. I found this method very interesting. Although obviously biased toward the education system I was brought up in, I remain uncertain on which system, that of the United States or of the United Kingdom, is more effective and thorough, in terms of not only preparing students for further education but also promoting the intellectual development of every student.

I was also surprised by the global perspective that permeated nearly every class in STMLC. Regardless of the subject, cultural references came up frequently in class discussion. This is also evident in their having an entire class dedicated to geography. I wish that the egotistical United States education system would embody a more culturally-minded outlook in teaching the youth of our country.

Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.

In terms of my personal development, I think working at STMLC deepened my experience in London in ways that normal coursework or cultural excursions could not. It pushed me way out of my comfort zone—into a new role as teacher (rather than a student) in a novel community within an unfamiliar neighborhood. As the student demographic is so diverse, I also believe it

encouraged me to become more culturally conscious and competent. I have always attended private, Catholic schools where nearly everyone is of the same socioeconomic class and racial background—a sheltered upbringing, and what I experienced at STMLC was very different from what I was used to in the United States.

It has also helped me professionally. I was held accountable for my work and time commitment and was expected to comport myself in a certain way. My role as an LSA led me to gain confidence and comfort in a professional setting.

As a Neuroscience and Behavior major and an Education, Schooling, and Society minor, I was very excited to observe and engage in the process of learning from a perspective other than that of a student—as before this internship that was all I had ever experienced. I began the internship eager to learn about special educational needs and how to enhance the learning experience of students who suffer from them. Although I did not gain as much concrete insight as I had previously hoped for, I did have invaluable firsthand experience in helping students with special educational needs. The internship stimulated countless curiosities related to education, encouraging my further studying of the subject.

Last, but certainly not least, this experience was very fruitful for me socially. I formed relationships with my fellow staff members and the students with whom I worked, making it very difficult for me to leave STMLC.

All in all, I learned about myself, British culture, and the field of education through my involvement with STMLC—the perfect supplement to my semester of studying abroad in London. From the feedback of my supervisor and from general conversation shared with my coworkers and students, I am certain that I had a very positive impact on everyone I spent the semester with.

Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.

This experience has provided me with a foundation for my ESS capstone project senior year. I hope to get involved in the special educational needs department of a local South Bend middle or high school, and this internship primed me with some basic ideas, questions, and opinions on which to base my plan.

It also led me to consider possible career paths that might integrate my interests in healthcare, education, and social concerns.

What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?

I would advise other students planning to pursue similar projects to apply for CUSE funding even if their projects might not seem like the typical ones. I was unsure if my internship met the criteria for funding as it was during my entire semester abroad, not over summer or another break, but am so glad that I applied—you really never know until you try. I also recommend that they figure out all of the details and logistics beforehand. Determining my academic curiosities, personal

goals, and even my finances before starting my internship allowed me to actively consider them while participating in it, staying on track and reflecting on my experience.
