

Finances need not hinder study abroad

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The Gilman scholarships enables excursions to the Duomo in Milan. Scholarships and Pell Grants make studying abroad affordable.

I studied abroad in Milan, Italy last year, utilizing the UR's sponsorship of the IES Program located right in the heart of the city. As an interdepartmental studies major with a concentration in Italian studies, choosing to study in Italy was a very natural decision. I supplemented my concentration by studying the Italian language and culture in its natural environment, away from my American university.

However, I have to admit I had serious doubts as to whether or not I was truly capable of financially supporting myself abroad, especially since I wanted to study in one of the most expensive cities in Europe and planned to spend a whole year there.

So why Milan? Milan is an authentic Italian city, practically untouched by tourism. On top of that, Milan contains a large metropolitan area with an abundance of easily accessible academic resources, providing a rich and genuine cultural backdrop for students.

Why an entire year? I wanted a full and prolonged linguistic immersion, essential to both my personal and professional goals. To a senior applying to Italian graduate programs which demand a mother-tongue knowledge of the language, a year-long immersion is invaluable.

Rather disheartened by my predicament, I sought help at the Center for Study Abroad during the spring semester of my sophomore year. There, I was presented with a myriad of scholarship opportunities and discovered the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship — open to all American university students who receive a Federal Pell Grant and are in need of financial assistance to study abroad. I was amazed by the easily accessible online application and the simple process of compiling the required documents. In the summer prior to my year abroad, I was notified that I had been chosen for an award of \$5,000.

Gilman funds are intended for the costs of program tuition, room and board, books, local airfare and, in particular, the costs of local transportation. With the Gilman funds, I was able to make frequent daily trips within the city, gaining professional experience by giving English lessons to a family on one side of Milan and teaching in an elementary school on the other.

Because of the scholarship's help, I could personally finance many cultural experiences of my own. I attended an opera at La Scala (one of the most famous opera houses in the world) and took numerous trips throughout the Italian peninsula — from an excursion to Monte Bianco on the border of Italy and France, to my Calabrian journey at the “toe” of the country to experience a completely different kind of Italian lifestyle.

All of these unique opportunities would not have been realized if it were not for the financial support I received from the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship. It wiped away all my worries, allowing me to study abroad without preoccupations and gave me a truly incredible experience.

I am ecstatic to say I reached my goal of complete proficiency in Italian. I am a true bilingual, a priceless skill that will definitely lead me to success after I graduate. My satisfaction increases as I think of the great rarity of what I accomplished: the number of young, proficient bilingual Americans is extremely small and a problem which must be resolved in the future.

I also grew greatly as an individual. I have a much stronger sense of self now than I ever had.

The scholarships are boundless; there is one for every kind of student, so financial difficulties must not dissuade anyone from fulfilling his or her dreams of going abroad. If you have a true passion, all the rest will fall into place.