

Engineering International Programs Office Interview with Ethan Staten *November 6, 2018*

Global Technology Practice -Study abroad program in Stuttgart, Germany.

Engineering student, Ethan Staten went on the GTP program in the summer of 2018, after his first year. He is currently majoring in Computer Engineering & Electrical Engineering. GTP is designed to give students an introduction to the development and use of technology in Stuttgart, Germany and the role of cultural values in shaping technology practice. Students will spend 4 weeks in Germany in the summer.



Did you have a positive experience in Germany?

I had a very positive experience in Germany, filled with a lot of reflection. Some formal reflection based on the academic expectations, but also quite a bit of personal reflection as well. It was a big change for me coming to University of Virginia, being an out-of-state student far away from home, from the Gulf coast of Mississippi.

What led you to participate in an education abroad program?

I knew one day I wanted to partake in an education abroad experience. One thing that I am personally very passionate about is being able to participate in experiences where I can get different perspectives in life. I truly believe that having different perspectives in life can really make for good learning experiences that you can discuss with others.

What's the number one way the experience contributed to your academic growth?

My first response would be, the fulfillment of requirements for my degree. The process of writing a research paper for the ENGR 4595 class allowed me to get some insight on what writing and research papers entail. The process of going out and collecting data, forming site tours, personal interviews, the entire process of going through archives and tying all this together to write a research paper. I remember the feedback that Professor Elzey gave me on the assignment. I should have done more while I was in Germany, I realize that now. I did not have quite enough data for the topic that I decided on. That experience in itself was actually something that I learned a lot from. Whether it be for another research paper or internship opportunity in the future, I realize when given this task, I need to go and collect extensive data. I view this actually as a better learning experience than just the academic requirements that I had to fulfill.

Were there any other set of challenges that you had to face and how did you deal with them?

The main challenge that I thought I was going to face going into the program would be of course the cultural/language barrier of Germany. Upon arrival and after being there for about the first week, I realized, actually, language barrier isn't much of a problem because a lot of Germans speak English. The only real hard road block I faced was ordering food or drinks in restaurants there.

The biggest challenge for me, personally, was being part of a group itself. I was still a bit doubtful of my social abilities at the time. That was actually my main challenge, being able to talk and bond with my fellow peers. The reason why I view this as a very important thing is because experiencing going to a foreign country and studying there for a brief amount of time, "Yes, that is a great learning experience!", but what makes it even better is that you have peers that you can reflect with and talk about and compare experiences. That I believe allows for a much wider scale of your view of the world.



Did you establish new friendships?

Yes, I actually did. During the program, we were all somewhat pretty close. We were a small group. Coming back here to University of Virginia, I actually do have some friendships with some of the people. I also have, not a friendship, but basically a mentorship with one of the fourth year students on the program. This student is actually at the very end of what I want to do here at UVA. He is double majoring in computer and electrical engineering and minoring in this program called the Technology Leaders Program. I just successfully declared all of those, as well. I would not have had that common bonding ground if we didn't partake in the GTP program.

What was your favorite part of your study abroad experience, and why?

There were a lot of highlights, but my favorite part would be the weekend hike in the Austrian Alps.

What was the most interesting/delicious cuisine you tried?

There is a bit of a story that goes with this one. Professor Elzey and his teaching assistant treated our entire group to a "halfway through our program" dinner at a very nice restaurant. Our meal and drink were completely covered. Everyone was looking through the menu and ordering things. Unfortunately, how it happens with me, I immediately look at the most expensive item on the menu. And it was forty euros, I remember that, a little over forty euros, so about \$50 in US dollars. It was two different types of steak with potatoes and asparagus. It was half a kilogram of meat on that plate! The point is should I order this? It's a lot. If I order this, I am going to eat it all. Then it comes and it is a BIG plate. The reason why this was the most delicious meal was because it was the best steak I've probably ever had.

As for regional meals, I would have to say the schnitzel was actually really good. There were multiple places where we had schnitzel.

What was your most meaningful experience from your time abroad?

I would say the experience as a whole. Being able to go and study abroad on this program was the most meaningful to me because I am the first person in my family to have studied abroad on top of being the first engineer in the family. And being the first in my family to go to college directly out of high school. After my first year at UVA I didn't think I was going to be able to study abroad, but I managed to do that. Just being able to study abroad in a different country and being able to get perspectives about engineering within a German perspective, but also life styles in a German perspective. The entire experience as a whole, I'd say is the most personal meaningful thing that I did while on the program.

Has your time abroad changed your plans for the future?

Before the study abroad program in Germany, I was always thinking I would work somewhere in the United States. I didn't really consider somewhere foreign to be truly an option. After the study abroad experience, I'm realizing that there is quite a bit of work to arrange personally to work outside of the United States. Of course, I would have to learn whichever language where I would be living.

It's much different being in a group of same American people for a month then going by yourself to work in a foreign country where you are completely immersed in the culture. After getting my foot in the door with study abroad, I realize I am not opposed to the idea. I'm actually considering it as an option, if the option is available to me. That is how study abroad has affected my future plans.

Sum up the experience in three words.

Reflective – There was a lot of reflection on all different levels. Personal, group based, academic based.

Cultural contrast – Being able to see differences in culture, from like American culture and German culture and realizing what Americans have that Germans don't and what Germans have that Americans don't. Being able to see both sides without reading about it in the newspaper or text. And actually going there and seeing it for a month. It's an amazing humbling experience.

Rejuvenating – I was carrying around a lot of things personally, I hadn't dealt with yet. Being on that experience and being able to get a different world view, different perspectives and different way of life. Culture. It actually helped me work through a lot of things. It definitely was a rejuvenating experience for me.

Did the program have any effect or impact on your view of engineering? Did it help to elucidate or illuminate anything to you?

Definitely. I understand some of the process that German engineers go through now after hearing lectures at the University of Stuttgart, going on some site visits - like the Mercedes Benz factory. I realize now that it actually is a worldwide collaborative experience. And by having the study abroad experience I can personally reflect on that. I may not be in Germany, I may be in something similar, we may be in the same working field. It really is a worldwide thing. There are different languages and different cultures, but overall we could be working for the same objectives.

Message to engineering students.

People who are not considering studying abroad, definitely consider it as an option. It is affordable so long as you take the necessary steps beforehand to fund it. The time abroad can be more impactful than a semester here. Maybe not academically, but having a better worldview. Also socially. You definitely form bonds with people you study abroad with. If the reasons why you may not consider study abroad are because of financial reasons, there are resources here at UVA to help you out. You just have to start looking early. If it is personal, is it a step outside of your comfort zone? Yes. Your going to a foreign country one you may or may not have experience with. That is part of the process going outside of your comfort zone. Learning new things within a new culture. And that is what I think helps with the learning experience the most.

And as for people who are considering study abroad, but still unsure of what exactly to do. There are multiple resources, definitely online, study abroad fairs and the International Studies Office here at UVA. Or just talking to people who studied abroad. To give an example of this, I just got done talking to the next potential class for the German Technology Practice Program, where I shared my experiences and insights for the program and the country. If you happen to know a friend who knows a friend that studied abroad, see if you can get in contact with them and have them tell you about the program. Not all the logistics, but the personal stories. Maybe some of their favorite memories. That may just motivate the person to pursue a study abroad experience.