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IPL Funding Deliverable: Personal Philosophy Development Through Onsite Experience
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This winter, I traveled to Paris to participate in a January term course called Onsite Perspectives: International Education Management in France. When I first arrived in Paris, I was honestly unsure what to expect from the program. Although we had participated in, not to mention created, our own pre-departure orientation, received the course syllabus and the first week's schedule, I knew from past experiences that there is no way to completely prepare oneself with 100% accurate expectations for a new experience.

Traversing the first few days of the program, I observed a number of post-arrival orientation sessions with my classmates. As I watched, I wondered how the students participating in the sessions were feeling about the adventure they had just begun. Was the first time they were visiting a new country? Were they anxious? Excited? Sleepy? Nervous about finding the best grocery store near their new home? Overwhelmed? Happy to be sitting by a new friend?

Realizing that each student had his or her own distinct emotional state and different needs to be derived from these information sessions, I began to understand how much rides on the first few days after arrival. Since this realization of the importance of a program's first few days, I have been trying to puzzle through how to decide what content to include in an orientation, and how to style each session to be effective and engaging; avoiding dreary days filled with students receiving an information-overload.

In addition to contemplating the state of the incoming students we were observing, I also began to reflect on my own experiences studying abroad and what I gained from my orientation sessions. I realized that most of my memories from orientations are a blur. There is so much going on at that time, so much to adjust to, so much information to take in, so much to accomplish in so little time – it almost seems a miracle that any of us manage to make it through to complete our experience abroad. This brings me to the question: how can we best balance challenge and support?

Orientation week is simultaneously very challenging and very full of support. The question of challenge versus support is one that has stuck with me since the subject was first broached in my Education Abroad Management course last semester (Fall 2017). The tools and information provided during orientation might be immediately applicable, necessary later in one's sojourn, or never useful to a particular student – most likely a mix of the three. How can a handful of staff – at any point in the process (pre-program, while abroad, and post-program) –

provide just the right amount of resources to allow students to grow, while also ensuring they never feel out-of-their-depth? I don't know if it's feasible to do so. Orientations must serve to provide knowledge of the support available, and to build the trust of students so they will come to staff members when they have need. The balance of challenge and support is something I want to continue to contemplate and pay close attention to as I move from student to practitioner.

I would really like to continue letting students figure out the world for themselves so they can create their own experiences. Each student chooses to study abroad for their own reasons, with their own backgrounds, personalities, and interests. They will each garner the learning they need from their time abroad; that is my challenge to them. My challenge to myself is to figure out how to foster students' exploration of their experience, positive or negative, so that they can use their time abroad to inform and deepen their understanding of self.

It was not until the end of our time in Paris that I began to realize my personal philosophy was developing. Our time abroad reaffirmed my awareness that I want to be strongly student-focused as a professional in the field of education, but it was not until after my return to MIIS that I was able to engage in several discussions with my peers that allowed me to begin to articulate the extend of my new realizations. I think this exemplifies a common trope in international experiences – perception and understanding of change is often only achieved after return, and only time can allow these changes to be identified and put into words. I gained a great deal of knowledge while abroad, but the most profound gain was not my understanding of others but a deepened, or maybe adjusted, understanding of myself.