

## Study Abroad Story: Lauren Clark

Hi, my name is Lauren Clark. I'm a current Junior at Valparaiso [University] majoring in political science and minoring in French. Last year from 2016 to 2017, I spent the year abroad; first in Paris and then in a *banlieu*, a neighbouring town just outside of Paris called Cergy-Pontoise, during a study abroad program.

I have always loved French since I was 16 or 15, and France has been a really big part of my life. I've dedicated a lot of my time and a lot of my energy to this language, and the country and the culture, so I was really excited when I went. I didn't know what to expect too much, besides really good coffee and delicious baguettes. However, in November I started to really miss my family even though I was in a wonderful host family and felt like I had integrated really well into the French society and into the French way of living- doing the whole "*métro, boulot, dodo*" kind of thing. I really missed my family and really questioned the education that I was getting. I wasn't feeling so satisfied [with my education] and I actually considered taking a semester off and moving back home with my Dad in Sacramento and going to UC Davis to study nutrition.

So, it was completely different [than how I imagined I would feel]. And actually, at that time, I wasn't a political science major; I was majoring in French and communications. I only got one credit of my communications credit done (I think?) \*laughs\*, which is funny. But I really wanted to quit, and I wasn't expecting that [feeling]. I was expecting things to go really smoothly, and it was a weird moment for me.

So, that was around November. I missed my family, I hadn't seen them for a couple months and I actually didn't see them for that entire year. But I ended up going to the south of France in December to spend time with some French family-friends. I felt really supported and it was nice to be around people that were like family. I had already met them before when I went to France the first time, at the age of 16. Then I went back to Paris at the end of December and started a new semester at a new university, this time, a French university [L'université de Cergy-Pontoise]. Before, I was at Boston University Paris. I had new classes and actually had to do an independent study on French politics, which I wasn't really sure how to approach.

I ended up going to a lot of French presidential candidates' meetings and a couple of rallies, and I ended up becoming so engaged in French politics, that I realized "Oh my goodness! Now I have a way that I can use my passion for the French language and culture and apply it to a science or a study that I will be able to impact and to learn a lot about". I ended up finding this new passion [for politics] and it showed me this new direction for my life that I never had considered before, and didn't even think that it matched with what I [previously had] wanted to do [with my life].

Because of this new passion that was also strongly fueled by my love for the French culture, I found two extra-curricular internships in Paris and spent almost every single day in Paris [while I lived in Cergy-Pontoise]. The internships were at political organizations or research institutions [at the Fondapol and the CEVIPOF]. It helped me make lasting connections that, to this day, have supported me on my path to return to France for my future studies and to eventually start my career and my life there.

This study abroad experience challenged me to finish what I started and to go into the unknown, which I think is an aspect of studying abroad that we hear about all the time [going into the unknown], or at least we think we're prepared, and then all of the sudden we're faced with something that we would have never even imagined could have happened to us, like getting our phone stolen...well maybe we can imagine that - that happened to me, actually. Or, just having an existential crisis and wanting to change one's life path entirely. So the internships that I had, the study abroad experience, the connections that I made, the host family that I stayed with, and the things that I learned about myself gave me a sense of purpose and direction, and a relatively clear path for the future. It also opened doors to opportunities that I would have never imagined, like an internship next semester at the European and Eurasian Affairs Bureau at the Department of State. That would have never been possible if I didn't have the experiences that I had when I studied abroad.

Studying abroad is a challenge in many ways, but it's beautiful because you grow in many ways that wouldn't expect, and I think ultimately, you're changed and matured, and you turn into this wonderful multicultural human being that is open to challenges and ready to overcome obstacles.