

French Led to an MBA and Life-long Friendships

As a 29-year-old co-founder of a real estate development and tourism company in Barcelona, Spain, I can say with certainty that I would not be where I am today had I not been involved in a fantastic French-language program, starting in middle school and continuing through high school and college.

As a middle school and high school student, I was initially drawn to the study of French language and culture because it was something new and different. I had lived almost all of my life in a small Midwestern college town in southern Indiana, and despite the presence of a large university that attracted students from the world around, I had not really lived in what you would call a multi-cultural environment. This initial interest helped me change the way I thought about other cultures, people, and ideas and was an initial step towards becoming the person I am today.

It is important to note that during my four years of high school I had the opportunity to travel to France twice: once with my French class on a touristic and cultural visit and once for three weeks on an exchange with a school and family in Le Mans, about an hour's train ride southwest of Paris. Guillaume and Céline became my « pen pals » for life after that year of cultural exchange. This fortunate combination of classroom learning and daily practice of French made the experience all the more important during these very formative years of my life.

As I made my decisions about going to college, one of the determining factors in my choice of university was that I had the opportunity to study abroad in a multidisciplinary program. So, once again, my study of French took me back to France, this time for my entire junior year, for study and for an internship. I lived in Paris, went to school and took classes in French, and made friends using French, worked in French, and even dreamt in French. I met one of my life-long friends Elodie during that time. The experience was life-changing as it was surely a cultural shift, but as I commented to my college advisor upon my return, perhaps the most important « culture shock » of the whole experience was coming back to live and work in the US again. This is because you don't realize how much you change and grow during this kind of experience until you are back in a situation that is the same, but your perspective is forever different.

Having worked for four years after college in a management consulting firm, I left to pursue an MBA. Curiously, I had not returned to France since my junior year in college and had only spoken French on the few occasions I hosted some of my old friends from France on their visits to the US. Nevertheless, my 10 years with a focus in French language and culture – three in middle school, four in high school, and four in college – caused and enabled me to consider something quite unique for American MBA students, the opportunity to enroll in a truly international MBA program. The main reason I refer

to this as unique for Americans is because this particular program required proficiency in English and two other languages.

So, by then, the interesting set of interdependencies that had been created was due, in part, to a great education in French language and culture. Had I not been familiar with French culture, I likely would not even have considered studying in France, of all places, for an MBA. Had I not have been fluent in French, I would not have been admitted to this MBA program. More importantly, had I not have been admitted, today, I would not also be fluent in Spanish because learning a third language was required by the MBA program. Incidentally, knowing French made it exceptionally easy to become conversational in Spanish within a very short time. In fact, my Spanish teacher told me I was the only American she had ever had in class that spoke Spanish a French accent! And finally, without Spanish, I would not be able to live and work in Barcelona, and certainly not owning my own business.

Studying language and culture is about learning how other people speak, think, and live life. It's not necessarily good all the time, and it's not necessarily bad, but it is different. As I mentioned before, it's about truly gaining a different perspective on human relations, on problem-solving, on life-style, work style, and most other daily-life kinds of things that you normally see only through your own cultural lens. Once you have that information, it's up to you to choose the best elements of each aspect and live them in your life.

Four years ago, Elodie was living in Chicago and I was able to spend time with her almost every weekend. Two years ago, I spent a week with Guillaume and Céline during the December holidays. This summer, I'll go to France for Guillaume's wedding in May and to Elodie's wedding in July. These life-long friendships were born of a mutual interest in intellectual and cultural exchanges of ideas and experiences. While this interest may be stronger or weaker, depending on the person, I can say with confidence that I would not be where I am today had I not been supported in the formative years by a great French language program.