

Study Abroad Reflective Essay

When I boarded my flight to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in August 2025, I knew I was stepping into something completely unknown. I hoped this semester would strengthen my Spanish and give me new perspectives on health and culture, but I never could have imagined how much it would change me. What began with fear and uncertainty became one of my life's most meaningful seasons of growth, connection, and self-discovery.

Santiago de Compostela immediately captured my heart. The city's cobblestone streets, stone cathedrals, and misty mornings made every day feel like walking through a story. Life moved at a different pace—slower, intentional, and beautifully human. Coming from a culture that often rushes from one thing to the next, I was struck by how people in Spain prioritized togetherness. Meals stretched for hours, conversations flowed easily, and strangers weren't afraid to stop and talk like old friends. Even the tradition of *la siesta*, when shops closed and streets grew quiet in the early afternoon, reflected a cultural value of balance that felt rare and refreshing. At first, it was strange to have everything pause mid-day, but soon it became comforting—a reminder that rest and community are just as important as work. Walking to class each morning along sunlit, narrow streets lined with cafés became one of my favorite parts of the day—a ritual that grounded me and reminded me how lucky I was to be there.

One of the most transformative parts of my semester was my internship at a local health clinic. I worked with patients affected by Alzheimer's disease, and at first, it was emotionally

challenging. My grandfather had been living with Alzheimer's at the time, and every patient reminded me of him—the confusion in their eyes, the pauses between words, and the quiet moments of uncertainty. It was painful to witness, and I often left feeling helpless. But over time, I began to see the good that remained—the spark that still existed beyond what the disease had taken. Some couldn't remember simple tasks, but they could still smile, laugh, or reach out to hold my hand. Those moments taught me that connection doesn't depend on memory; it depends on presence. That experience helped me find peace with my grandfather's diagnosis and deepened my understanding of what it means to truly care for someone. I realized medicine isn't only about curing disease—it's about compassion, empathy, and simply being there when nothing else can be done.

Living abroad for sixteen weeks wasn't always easy. There were moments when I felt out of place, when homesickness hit unexpectedly, or when everyday tasks felt overwhelming. One of my biggest challenges came when I got sick and needed to go to the emergency room. Sitting there alone, trying to explain my symptoms in Spanish while filling out paperwork, was one of the most overwhelming moments of my semester. Yet it also became one of the most defining. The doctors and nurses were patient and kind, guiding me through the process and ensuring I felt understood. That experience taught me to stay calm under pressure, to advocate for myself, and to trust that things will work out even when I feel unsure. It reminded me how small gestures of empathy can ease fear in moments of vulnerability. I learned what it feels like to be on the other side of care—to feel scared, confused, and in need of reassurance. As a future physician, I want to remember that feeling and meet every patient with the same patience, understanding, and compassion that others showed me.

My time in Santiago continues to shape how I see my future. Studying abroad taught me lessons that extend far beyond the classroom—how to adapt to new environments, communicate across cultures, and lead with empathy when things don't go as planned. These lessons will guide me as I pursue a career in medicine. Cultural adaptability and compassion, I've learned, are as essential as clinical skill. I hope to bring these values into every patient encounter, using the patience and understanding I gained in Spain to build trust and connection. Santiago taught me to slow down, to listen before I speak, and to meet people where they are—skills that will stay with me long after graduation.

When I first arrived in Spain, I was nervous and unsure of what the next four months would hold. But when it came time to leave, I cried as I said goodbye to my host family, friends, and the city that had become home. My fear of the unknown had turned into gratitude for everything I had found—belonging, confidence, and a more profound sense of who I am. Santiago de Compostela was more than a destination; it was a turning point. It reminded me that growth begins where comfort ends and that the most meaningful experiences are the ones that change how you see yourself and the world. I returned to Clemson not just as a better student, but as a more grounded, open-hearted person. Santiago taught me that healing—whether through language, community, or medicine—always begins with empathy.