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My abroad experience, I can say without hesitation, has been anything but ordinary. Whereas an American student usually finds himself or herself getting to know other American students and taking courses in English, I found myself in a completely different setting. I overcame obstacles that I felt at times could not be surmounted. I chose to do a program that no one from Santa Clara University was familiar with, completely immersing myself in the European University System as an exchange student, which turned out to be one of the most rewarding decisions I have ever made. At the end of it all, I have learned more than I could have ever hoped for. My language skills were able to thrive, I was able to successfully pass classes taken in Italian with intimidating, one on one, oral final exams and I was able to converse with Italian students and the Florentine culture in a way that I could not have imagined possible.

The courses I took in the Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia at the Università di Firenze were anything but easy. I cannot say this was entirely because of the language, though. As I study art history, the courses I took that pertain to the subject matter involved developing complex ideas, some of which I was not even familiar with in English! The professors are clearly knowledgeable in their subjects, though. My comprehension according to the way each professor speaks also played a large part of the initial difficulty. In time, though, one adapts. I found myself wanting more than ever to succeed in becoming a part of this university and Florence itself.

My choice to do the direct exchange with the Università di Firenze has opened my eyes to a culture whose surface is barely even reached, let alone dug into. This experience has also been one of the hardest I have ever faced. I took what came to me in stride, however, and whatever hardships I was confronted with I knew I could overcome. If another student from Santa Clara were to do what I did, I can only advise them to be prepared and to take everything in stride. They same Rome wasn't built in a day. To me, Florence is still being built. Getting to know the culture is also an essential aspect needed to succeed. Some of my favorite days were the ones spent enjoying the food from the Mercato di San Lorenzo, grabbing a cappuccino for one euro with some friends from

class, and soaking in as much as I could, remaining thankful and humbled by the intensity of such an amazing Provincia. I was lucky enough to gain an understanding of an entirely new university system. It opened my eyes to just how closed off one really is without getting to know another way of life. Above all, though, this experience has made me more thankful than ever for the amazing education I am receiving at Santa Clara. I know I will return to Firenze one day at a different time in my life, with a new appreciation for all that I accomplished in these five months and all that still be accomplished.

Through my experiences at the Università di Firenze and in the city, I learned that getting to know an entirely different educational and cultural structure is a slow yet constructive process. One must remain with eyes wide open and a complete acceptance of things as they come. Some advice that I was continually given by Silvia, the woman I lived with, was, “Piano, piano” which could translate to “slowly, slowly,” or, as I came to understand it, “it takes time.” It was the most common yet most effective advice I ever received.

It is strange to speak of my time abroad now the past tense because it has become such a huge part of me. Even as I close this letter, my brain has a hard time refusing to translate things into Italian. One thing is clear about my time abroad; none of it would have been possible without the help I received from the Sister County Commission. From the beginning and throughout the entire five and a half months that I was living in Florence, you showed interest through emails about my whereabouts, help during the grueling weeks awaiting enrollment, and support when it was needed most. I am so very fortunate to have had this wonderful group of people beside me during this time of intellectual growth and development, and I could not be more appreciative for everything that has been given to me. I received so much more than I could have ever asked for and I would like to thank the Sister County Commission for everything from the bottom of my heart.

Sincerely,
Julia Detweiler