

# OPINION

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possible, I had to have serious talks with my family. I trusted that they would give me their honest opinions about whether or not they felt this was a good idea for me. If anyone felt that I should stay home, I would. All the members of my family were thoughtful and honest (I think!) in offering their opinions, and, within a few days, I had their full support.

Next on the list of questions: What about my job? I had been working as a massage therapist for almost three years for a great chiropractor and had (have) a wonderful group of regular clients. I happen to be very lucky that my employer is also one of my best friends. As my friend, she completely understood my desire to study in Italy. As her friend, I understood that she had a business to run. We had an honest talk and reached an agreement that she would hire someone temporarily in my place. My intention is to return to work at the end of the semester, but we also realize that things may change. This was a better outcome than I had even hoped for.

Everything started falling into place. I was accepted into the

program, thrilled to discover that I was eligible for a scholarship, and ecstatic when the student loan was approved. I went to several meetings/gatherings to learn about the program and meet the students and faculty involved in the program.

After months of cautious optimism, I was faced with a very scary reality: my friends, family, job, school, and my fragile financial stability were all willing to let me go – and return. Because I never believed it would be possible, I never really contemplated the magnitude of what I would be missing if I did leave. I knew that I had to do this, but it did not mean that it was easy to apply, to decide, to pack, or to leave.

The actual minutiae of things to do prior to my departure were at times overwhelming. Kevin and Amanda at the study-abroad office talked me out of my panic – more than once. It is simply impossible to bring everything needed in one suitcase and one carry-on bag, so decisions had to be made. And I pulled it off, not gracefully, not completely, but I did it. I got on the plane with my new classmates,

who at the time were still a nice group of strangers, to enter into the most rigorous experience of my life.

I have just passed the halfway point of the semester, and for the most part, it seems that being older is almost inconsequential. The dis/advantages of being 23+ are numerous, but the more I know my classmates, the more I think each of us has our own unique set of talents and challenges that ultimately leave all of us on an equal footing.

As an older student, and only in my second semester of college, I'm still learning how to be a student. Since I didn't develop good study habits in elementary or high school, I'm learning how to learn all the while assimilating an extraordinary amount of information. It seems to take me much longer than my classmates to complete the same assignments, but I like going at my own pace. I am much less fashion-conscious than they are, although I'm confident that at times I am more comfortable on long walks and on chilly days. For me, spending time at night or on the weekends doing homework is a luxury, but my classmates firmly believe I am missing out. I am continually flattered that they would even ask me to join them at the "discoteca." I probably desire and need more time alone than most, which is different from a college lifestyle. I have been able to find the space I need. Sometimes I wish I had someone my own age to talk to, but I can talk to friends at home. I think we all wish some of our own friends were here to share this with. I don't know if age is really a factor.

Uniformly, we have all left behind loved ones, cultural familiarity, ease in communication, and support systems. We have all gained a new home, a new culture, new friends and varying amounts of ease of communication in Italy. We all have to figure out how to cope with such tremendous losses and gains. So far, we have been able to turn to each other for support. Even though we are all very recent friends, we have a unique bond. We have everything we need here, the staff, faculty, and friends of the program are everywhere with information, support, and answers to every imaginable question.

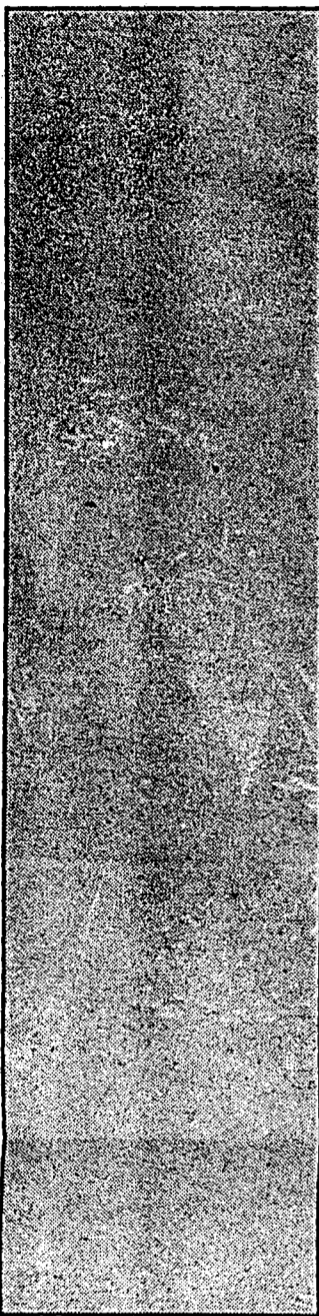
My initial concerns about being here have been resolved. It is possible to survive in Italy without

eating meat or cheese and without drinking wine or espresso. Most of the time, I have my own bedroom and sometimes I share a bedroom; each has its advantages. I have been frugal with my money and planned carefully, including a few indulgences (like Pashmina scarves). So far, I have had an endless number of valuable experiences without plenty of money.

Studying abroad is hard. I imagined it would be, but nothing could have prepared me. Every day here has at least one challenge either personally, socially, academically, culturally, or some combination of each element. Somehow, however difficult everything can be, it only makes the experiences more meaningful to me: I am learning more about myself than I am about Italy in World War II – and that's a considerable amount. I am listening more than I ever have... it's easier when I can't speak the language. I am learning slowly to speak Italian, but I feel that my comprehension has skyrocketed over the past few weeks.

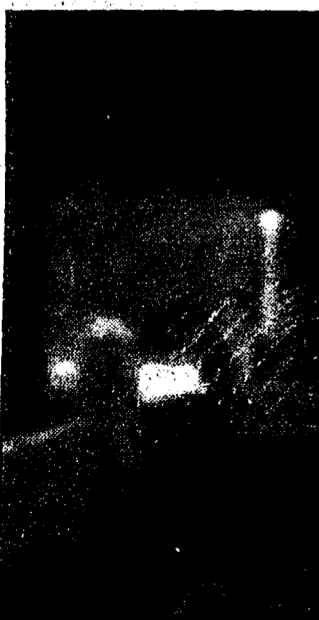
During our trustee/alumnae visit, longstanding supporters of Dr. Webb's study abroad program, Mr. and Mrs. Langley brought us pizza and validated what I had been feeling, that this experience has been deepened by the connections I have made with my classmates, which I hope will last a lifetime. What bonds all of us together is that no matter how many journals we write, or how many pictures and videos we take, or how many hours we spend on Skype telling our families about our time here, no one will ever understand this experience the same way we do. We are the first; we are "The Immortal Nine." We are all here on equal ground learning this program together. It is impossible to compress and transmit the full grandeur of this experience to anyone who is not here with us. There is no image that can be emailed, spoken, painted, or written, to anyone that captures the aroma of our lunches, the energy of the artwork, the sounds of Sansepolcro, or the experiences of being part of the finest study-abroad program in Italy.

I think the only way someone could fully appreciate this program is to sign up and experience it for herself....



## Classified Ads

Private tutoring for math, chemistry, computer programming, BS Chemistry, Math minor, industrial experience. Four years on staff Florida Community College Jacksonville, 2+ years private tutor. References: gfruzze@bellsouth.net or <http://www.facebook.com/snood>



## ask gigi

Dear Gigi,

I am a transfer student, and I am not from the Raleigh area. My parents are coming to visit this weekend, and they are looking for some good places where we can eat together as a family. What do you recommend?

Sincerely,  
Hungry in Raleigh

Dear Hungry in Raleigh,

The Raleigh area has a ton of places to eat and hangout with your parents. It really depends on what your family's budget and food preferences are. There are quite a few restaurants and fun places to go to that are close to Meredith, like those found in Cameron Village. Cameron Village has a lot of different casual dining places, and it is a nice place to walk around; there are lots of shops to look in. Also, another popular place to go eat at is The Mellow Mushroom close to downtown Raleigh. Finally, there are a lot of places to eat and thing to do in downtown proper. I hope these are enough good ideas to get you started. Have a great time with your parents and I hope you all enjoy the Raleigh area this weekend.

Sincerely,  
Gigi