Study abroad students return to the U.S. amidst rising COVID-19 concerns

Alana Sabol, News Writer|April 4, 2020

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On Friday, March 13, Allegheny College announced in an email that they are requiring students that are studying abroad in a country with a CDC Level 3 Travel Warning to return to the United States as soon as possible. Two weeks later, former study abroad students are feeling the effects of having to end their international experiences prematurely.

Flannery Pillion-Gardner, ’21, arrived in Cologne, Germany, on March 4 to begin studying at the University of Cologne in a five-month program. However, after just two weeks in Germany she was required to return to the U.S. due to a Level 3 Travel Warning being enacted in the country. Germany currently has over 90,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, according to the John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

“(Only being there for two weeks) was the worst part of it,” Pillion-Gardner said. “I was just starting to get used to it.”

She arrived a month before classes started in April and spent most of her time getting to know her two roommates and exploring the city.

“Every day I would go to a new place,” Pillion-Gardner said. “I would go to cafes and read, or go to museums, or just go on walks around the city.” She described the day that she was notified to return to the U.S. as “the worst day ever.”

Director of International Education Lucinda Morgan contacted Pillion-Gardner and Kyra Nielsen, ’21, another student studying in Cologne, on March 12 to discuss the developing pandemic and their thoughts on whether to remain in Germany or not.

“At this point, we were fine staying there,” Pillion-Gardner said. “We both expressed that we wanted to stay even though Cologne is in (North Rhine-Westphalia, which had) the most coronavirus cases.”

Pillion-Gardner expected to stay in Cologne after Morgan contacted them, since she was just calling to check in with the students amidst the outbreak. However, later that day, Pillion-Gardner received a text from Morgan asking to call her immediately.

“(I called her and found out that) because Germany had been moved to a Level 3, we had to come home and we had to get (plane) tickets super fast,” Pillion-Gardner said. “She told me on Thursday and I had a (flight) on Saturday.”

Pillion-Gardner believed President Donald Trump’s announcement on March 12 about enacting a European Travel Ban contributed to the unexpected turnaround.

Currently, like the other study abroad students who were asked to return, Pillion-Gardner is working with Associate Provost and Director of the Gateway Terry Bensel to get reimbursed for the semester.

“I literally have not taken any classes, (so I’m planning) to take this semester off,” Pillion-Gardner said. “Then I’ll stay an extra semester at Allegheny (during the fall 2021 semester]).”

Despite her experience, Pillion-Gardner is staying optimistic for the future. Even though her semester was cut short, Pillion-Gardner emphasized that she hopes to be able to go on another study abroad program during the fall 2020 semester.

Kyra Nielsen had a similar experience in Cologne, Germany. She stayed for three weeks before having to return to the U.S..

While she was in Cologne, Nielsen began taking pre-semester language courses that were offered to international students and started to meet people.

“Then (the pandemic situation) started getting worse,” Nielsen said. “There was a case of COVID-19 confirmed at the university; borders were starting to close, so the International Office figured it was better to get out while we still (could).”

Nielsen found out she was going back home through a plane ticket confirmation email that was sent to her by her mother.

In the afternoon that day, she discussed the situation with her parents and Morgan and realized she had to return to the U.S. after the travel restrictions were put in place.

“I went to my language class that afternoon, and then that evening I packed up, and the next day I was on a plane home,” Nielsen said. “So it was pretty fast.”

Nielsen also de-enrolled for the spring semester and is planning on returning to Allegheny in the fall.

Study abroad students in countries with a Level 2 Travel Warning are allowed to continue their studies.

This is the case for Stephanie Bramwell, ’21, who is currently studying at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies in Kibbutz Ketura, Israel, until June 10.

“I’m having an amazing time,” Bramwell said. “This is a horrible situation but I was really excited to do the study abroad program, and before all the craziness of the past few weeks it was absolutely wonderful.”

As the pandemic unfolded, the Arava Institute was debating on whether they would have to close or not, and Allegheny was working on keeping in touch with their study abroad students and finding the best courses of action for each program.

“During that process, it was made clear to me by both Arava and Allegheny that they would help me get back and that they really wanted

to try to (let me stay) if possible," Bramwell said. "If I couldn't stay, (they would try) to make sure I get credit for the semester somehow and I really really appreciated that."

As of now, people on Arava's campus are not allowed to gather in groups of more than 10 and they are not allowed to leave in groups of more than two. Therefore, the institute has been doing online instruction for the past two weeks. According to the John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, 7,428 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed in Israel.

"We really try to build community and there are different projects that we are working on together because it's also an environmentally-focused group," Bramwell said. "The limits of how many people can gather together have affected how we work on those projects."

As far as what is going to happen in the next few months regarding her study abroad program, Bramwell is not sure, but there are multiple possibilities.

"(The Arava Institute) is really hoping to stay open," Bramwell said. "If for some reason the institute is no longer able to run, they are going to help us international students figure out either how to get home, or if we're not able to get home, what other lodgings in Israel(we could stay in)."

According to the alerts that Bramwell has been getting from the U.S. Embassy, there are no available flights to the U.S.

“I don’t think I’ll be heading home before the program ends, even if the Arava Institute closes,” Bramwell said. “I also think if (Arava) closes we’ll still try to have Zoom call classes even if there aren’t students on campus.”

Though she isn’t sure what the situation is going to look like at the end of the semester in June, Bramwell remains optimistic.

“I’m optimistic I’ll be able to get home sometime this summer and maybe even when (I’m) supposed to in June.” Bramwell said.