



10 [UNDERSTANDING]  
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**Study Abroad Program:** France



*La Vienne River*

The month before I left the United States, I flipped through a brochure filled with photos of Limoges and strained to imagine myself in this town at the heart of France. *Is it too small for me?* I thought. *How will I get along with people in this new culture?* The wheels of my mind spun with hypothetical scenarios and notions of what French people might be like. These questions evoked an inexplicable feeling that led me to pack my things and move to rural France for four months. I wanted to discover a microcosm of European culture, gain an understanding of people who think differently and see the world through another lens.

On the day of my arrival, my train sputtered into the station of Limoges some two hours late. It was getting dark outside and the welcoming team had already gone home. I was annoyed, tired and nervous. I tried to maintain my composure and suppress the feeling of dread rising up in me. I felt totally left to my own devices. After taking some time to put together a game plan, I hailed a taxi and left for my bed and breakfast. Upon arriving, I realized that not only was the door locked, but my host, Pascal,

was nowhere in sight. I called to see where he was, but all I could gather from his rambling on the phone was that he was angry, not home and upset by the quality of my French. I was offended by his coarseness and dumbfounded by his impoliteness. Although Pascal was well-intentioned, his brash attitude made me want nothing more than to catch the next flight back home.

However, Pascal taught me something about the difference between understanding and perception. Perception is a biased judgment rooted in preconceived notions and first impressions. It is not always wrong, but is never the complete reality. The host was far from warm and welcoming, but his intention was not malicious. After meeting him, I found out he was extremely nice and wanted to do whatever he could to make me feel at home. He, like so many French people I met, was simply not hospitable in the same way as so many in Oklahoma. This difference in helpfulness and general niceties was a serious adjustment.

My third week, I met with my French advisor,

Said Ouaked. I opened up to him about the challenges of being in this new environment. I talked to him about how different life was in Limoges compared to my hometown of Norman. He listened, waited and then spoke. He legitimized my difficulties and challenges with the idiosyncrasies of France and encouraged me to give myself space to take in all my surroundings. It was not until I established a routine and way of life there that I found myself growing fonder of it. Going abroad requires a temporary abandoning of your way of life so that you might fully embrace a new one, understand its benefits and appreciate it for what it does well rather than what it does not. It inspired me to adventure more, knowing that nearly anywhere in the world I go there will be people who want to help me and welcome me. Study abroad changed me because it brought to the surface who I am and the things that make me come alive. I loved Limoges, and the things I learned there were imperative in my journey to discovering who I am becoming.

Limoges became a place to immerse myself in the French way of life, away from the noise and bustle of the University of Oklahoma. It was a sleepy place with kindly mannered citizens and incredible food. Albeit charming and adventurous, Limoges taught me how to understand a culture far different from my own, to move on when I do not handle challenges well, and to embrace outlooks quickly and process them slowly. Americans are generally a task-oriented people who love to stay busy, a trait with which I am well acquainted. But in Limoges, I took a lot of long walks in quiet afternoons, meeting locals along the way. On these walks, I grew. My racing mind learned how to embrace the French perspective and how to understand even when I felt misunderstood.

