

My CTY Summer Program Impressions

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March, 2011. I browse the Internet and seek out new opportunities which could contribute to broadening my horizons. My interest is caught by a pilot project of an organization about which I've never heard before, the American Fund for Czech and Slovak Leadership Studies (AFCSLS). They promise a three-week study program for ten students in the USA. I've never come across such a thing before. I wonder who the people in charge of the project are, and what their motives to do this are. I have to wait two more years, until the answers come to me from participating in their program directly in the third year of the competition.

Meanwhile, I do my research, too, to find out more about AFCSLS, their partnership organization the Center for Talented Youth (CTY) and, more importantly, their mission. Nevertheless, no words can come up to a first-hand experience.

The path that led me to Princeton this summer was quite a long run, during which I learned several new things and got to know a few people. But most importantly, I really got to know a very important part of myself. Determination. My key to success.

I became enthusiastic about the project immediately after I read about it in 2011. At that time, I eagerly applied. I filled an application and wrote an essay. I couldn't believe how lucky I was when I received an e-mail with an invitation to the interview. However, I wasn't meant to rejoice for long. In a few days I found out, that the date of a school exchange program where I registered overlaps. Since that instant, I was facing a tough dilemma. I terribly wanted to manage both, so I was searching for alternative ways such as coming back from the exchange sooner, or having the interview via Skype. Unfortunately, nothing was possible and in the end, I just needed to make a choice.

"A sparrow in the hand is better than a pigeon on the roof."

Precisely as the famous proverb says, I decided to relinquish my place in the interview round in favor of a substitute and go for a warranted exchange instead. Nevertheless, long after I wasn't sure if I had made a right decision.

I wait one more year and then try again. This time, I make sure that nothing gets into the dates of interviews, and thankfully, I make it to one. Nonetheless, I don't succeed and my decision from the previous year turns out to be right. My English doesn't come up to the high standards laid.

This motivates me to work hard, I start to visit a language school, prepare myself for a CAE exam and go in for a Czech-English exchange with a young lady from Ireland.

By now, you probably have an idea what I was doing this year's spring. Don't worry, this time my story of applying for the scholarship ends. I was invited to come to Princeton this summer. Hard work paid off.

"Third time lucky."

I make my way through the aisle on a plane. It turns out I sit next to a very friendly American lawyer with Italian origins. We entered into conversation and he said that last summer, his friend had had a wedding in Princeton. He told me that I was going to have a great time there. And he was right.

The three weeks passed incredibly quickly, partly due to a busy schedule we had, but mostly because of a great company which surrounded us. Every single person I met acted in a very friendly and respectful way.

One day, we were having dinner in the dining hall and all of a sudden, there was applause. In advance, I was sorry for the poor fellow, who probably flipped over his plate. But I couldn't be more mistaken. The applause was for a Chinese girl who tried to use silverware for the first time in her life. It was nothing sarcastic on the contrary, it was encouraging and genuine.

The story aptly depicts the way my peers treated each other. There was no room for making fun of others. On the contrary, supporting each other was appreciated. Perhaps, it was due to the CTY community membership, which obliged its members to observe its rules and principles. Maybe, CTY just contributed to the usual manners of local students, which are based on being nice and respectful to others. Either way, I really felt as a part of that community, despite different environment, culture and education. I wish that at least most Czech people treated each other in such a way, too.

It was the variance in educational approach which took me by surprise. Their system is based on proverbial American extroversion. The whole process of thinking involved constant discussion and interaction with others. I took an epidemiology course and during the class, we mainly worked in small groups, trying to find out solutions to problems related to lecture and eventually explaining the issue to entire class.

On the contrary, we Czechs would rather concentrate on the problems coming up with solutions alone. I am the type of person who prefers to think through in advance of discussing something (on top of that being quite competitive), and that's why I would rather prefer our way of learning in this respect, as speaking off-hand is really not my cup of tea. Nevertheless, I enjoyed getting another perspective on the thing.

However, what I really liked about local educational attitude was the way we have been shown how to apply learned strategies in real life. I find this approach very beneficial. As a consequence, not only the students come to understand the topic more naturally, but they also consider its uses and overall, remember more in the end.

The way we learned in Princeton needs to be put down to our great professor and his professional merits. He is a consultant at the World Health Organization and teaches at Yale University at the same time. He is a very inspiring person and I'm really glad I could meet him. He goes on missions to countries such as Nigeria and helps to take care of ill people there. Everybody in our group looks up to him for the things he has done for other people.

I was pleasantly surprised by his affability. Such fully occupied people usually prefer not making themselves available but he is the exception that proves the rule. Despite his credentials, he is a very approachable person and encouraged us to stay in touch via e-mail.

Altogether, my summer experience gave me not just new contacts, friends and acquaintances, but also an insight into the American educational system and the possibilities of how to become a part of it. We went on a Princeton University open day, found out some information on how we can apply, and eventually went on a campus tour with a current student.

We went through the same procedure at Columbia University in New York. I think that such insights were very beneficial as many of us are considering applying for the universities abroad.

After finishing our courses in Princeton, our Czech and Slovak group stayed in New York for a weekend. We spent a wonderful time there, besides the Columbia University visiting famous places such as Central Park, Times Square or Rockefeller Center.

We were invited to a meeting with sponsors at the Bohemian National Hall, where we met people originally of Czechoslovak origins, who had the courage to go abroad in the times when it was tough, and became successful.

I'm glad we could meet people such as Ája Vrzáňová, the 1949 and 1950 world figure skating champion or Henry Kallan, a very ambitious and successful hotel owner from Slovakia, who told us how he started from scratch and worked his way up in New York. As a person who is interested in biological sciences and medicine, I was thrilled to encounter Dr. Ján Vilček, a scientist focusing on microbiology and immunology.

We spent a really wonderful time in New York, owing to Simeon Brodsky and Martin Herman who made a great effort to make the program according to our ideas and we really appreciate that. They both were very self-sacrificing, accompanying us during the hottest weather since morning until late evening. I can't really express how grateful I am not just for the time spent in New York, but for organization of the whole program, coming to Brno for students' interviews and, most importantly, seeking funding to make it all possible. Thank you very much for everything.

A few days ago, I woke up from my version of an American dream. It was somewhat incredible but at the same time, there was something genuine about it.

Everybody knows that feeling when you are dreaming and you would love to see that particular dream become reality because it's perfect. But all of a sudden, you wake up, inadvertently.

Then, we do whatever is possible to fall asleep again and make our dream continue. Sometimes we are lucky and succeed, even though the setting might be slightly changed.

Next year, I am determined to apply abroad. I have picked out one particular university, which is my desire. I will try hard to get there and continue my dream from this summer. Hopefully, I will fall asleep a bit faster, this time. After all, I have been practicing in recent years.