

Spring 2008

Adventures in Researching: Exploring Cordoba and Montevideo

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Recommended Citation

Diegel, Amanda, "Adventures in Researching: Exploring Cordoba and Montevideo" (2008). *Inquiry Journal*. 3.
http://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2008/3

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commentary

Adventures in Researching: Exploring Cordoba and Montevideo

—**Amanda Diegel** (Edited by Jessie Robie)

Arrival at the Buenos Aires airport followed a practiced routine for me. I passed through immigration with patience, skillfully balanced my several pieces of luggage, and headed toward the exit, confident that after spending a year in Latin America I knew what to do in an unfamiliar environment. Yet as soon as I stepped outside the terminal, I became overwhelmed by a face of South America I had never seen before. It began with a blast of frigid winter air I thought impossible in this region. Then I found myself fumbling in an unfamiliar Spanish dialect and mesmerized by an unexpectedly European city. A new adventure was already unfolding before my eyes, marked with unknown surprises and rewards.

A long road had led me to that sensational arrival in Argentina. Coupling Spanish and political science courses at the University of New Hampshire had transformed my study of Spanish language and culture from simply an elective to an area of real interest. Latin America suddenly became an intricate battlefield of dictatorships and proxy wars; revolutions based on land rights and indigenous struggles; and vibrant, persevering peoples.



Panorama of Buenos Aires from one of its most sacred sites, the soccer field.

Studying in Peru and Costa Rica during the 2006–2007 academic year had reaffirmed for me this view. While adapting to daily life abroad, I began discovering the diversity of Latin America. Although broadly united by language and tradition, the countries each maintained its own political history and culture. Several of the nations had begun transitioning to democratic governments during the 1970s and '80s. Among them were Argentina and Uruguay, two countries culturally, economically, and demographically similar; and both with a history of dictatorships.

Today, however, Uruguayans support democracy significantly more strongly than do Argentineans. Why the difference? Here was the research project, designed before and during my year studying abroad, that brought

me to the Buenos Aires airport in June 2007. My plan was to administer the same survey to students at several high schools in a major city of each country, Cordoba in Argentina and Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay. My purpose was to determine if the education systems contributed to the markedly different levels of popular support for the restored democracies.

My year in Peru and Costa Rica awakened me to the importance of learning through firsthand experience, so I knew I had to personally administer the surveys. To research how the education systems influenced their students' attitudes toward a democratic government, it was important for me to see those students in their classrooms and in their daily lives—to know them as more than data tabulated from surveys.

My surveys, written and translated in Peru and at UNH, included questions about political trust, confidence, interest, and social integration within the school and in the general society. They did not take into consideration different curricula, school policies, faculty goals, or neighborhood demographics. All these variables impact student exposure to civics courses, where forms of government and democracy would be presented. The only efficient way to gather information about these factors was to work personally with each school participating in the study.

The cross-cultural interactions with students and faculty in each country were both challenging and fulfilling. I met and talked with school principals and directors in the formal Spanish of their profession, which was difficult. Even more challenging was communicating with the students. Imagine standing in front of entire secondary school classes, sometimes of fifty students, and talking to them as a foreigner with a foreign accent. At first, I dreaded the possibility of students snickering at my words, mocking my presence in front of the class. Yet, while some classes were filled with the usual troublemakers, students were overwhelmingly eager to learn about my work, my life, and my culture. Often I would teach English in the schools as a way to repay them for collaborating in my research, and this was the most fulfilling part of my experience. Students in the bilingual (English and Spanish) schools jokingly harassed me for my North American accent—it wasn't the "proper" British way they were taught to speak. Students in public schools forced me to speak Spanish in their English classes, schooling me in their slang. Every classroom asked if I had a boyfriend, my opinion of President Bush, and if Americans *really* ate eggs for breakfast.

Conducting my research on site also allowed me to experience the daily life of the cities I was surveying. In the United States, I had found much contradictory material on Argentina and not enough information on Uruguay. Interacting with the residents helped me understand how they really perceived their government. Taxi drivers, professors, college students, librarians, hostel workers, passengers on long bus rides—everybody had something to say about the government.

Professors, principals, and teachers in both countries related their experiences in the education systems during the dictatorships and the transitions to democracy. In Argentina I heard testimonies by family members whose loved ones had "disappeared," which usually meant they had been kidnapped and killed. I talked to young people who recalled high school teachers referring to the dictatorship as the "glory days." There the dictatorship was brought up nightly on the news in some way or another, while in Uruguay the dictatorship seemed to be long gone, lingering only in academic dialogue. Uruguayans considered their dictatorship less severe than those in Argentina and Brazil, which made them feel that, comparatively, they have been politically stable. Such a feeling and condition are very uncommon in Latin America.

These observations enhanced greatly my understanding of the political cultures in the two countries. No article or book could have awakened me to the complex variables of my research to the extent that visiting my study sites accomplished.

My departure for the United States was almost as dramatic as had been my arrival in Buenos Aires. Scurrying through the terminal at the last boarding call while juggling my four hundred and fifty surveys, I must have been a sight for fellow passengers. My hands were full of collected data, my overstuffed luggage with notes and articles, my mind with impressions of two cities and two remarkable experiences. Cruising north at 5000 feet, it dawned on me that this chapter in my research adventure had closed, and a new one was waiting for me at home.

I would like to extend many thanks to all of those who made this “adventure” possible: the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research staff and donors, who provided my Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship abroad; Professor Mary Malone; Maria Elena and Gloria Luna; and Rosario Queirolo. I would like also to thank Professor Reinertsen, Professor Strauss, Professor Potter, and Professor Griffin for helping me analyze and write up my findings. Finally, I would like to thank the schools, students, and citizens of Cordoba and Montevideo for welcoming me and sharing their stories.

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Author Bio

*When **Amanda Diegel** of Westfield, Massachusetts, chose to study Spanish in high school, she had no idea where it would take her. After years of studying Latin American history and politics at the University of New Hampshire, a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship Abroad allowed her to research on site the democracies of Argentina and Uruguay. Amanda believes that she would not have been able to complete her research without all of the help she received: “It wasn’t just me doing this work, it was people such as mentors, hostel owners, school principals and maids. When I got back people said, ‘You accomplished so much,’ but it wasn’t just me.” Amanda is majoring in sociology and international affairs and will graduate with a B.A. in May 2008. She already has plans to continue traveling abroad after graduation, this time with the Peace Corps in Africa.*

Mentor Bio

*Dr. **Mary Malone** is an assistant professor of political science at the University of New Hampshire, where she has taught since 2003. Her areas of specialization are Latin American politics, democratization and rule of law. Amanda credits Dr. Malone with piquing her interest in Latin America and helping her with every step of her project: “Dr. Malone worked with me while I was abroad and set me up with amazing mentors in the countries I visited.” Dr. Malone also mentored Colleen Flaherty in her summer 2007 research project on democracy in Chile.*