# “I came to MSU Specifically to Participate in the WGS Amsterdam Study Abroad”

Dialogue has been edited for clarity.

Stephanie Nawyn (SN): Hello! This is Professor Stephanie Nawyn, the Co-Director of Academic Programs at the Center for Gender in Global Context and I oversee our Women’s and Gender Studies Program. I’m here with Carlyn Arteaga who is just graduate with her major in Social Relations and Policy and her minor in Women’s and Gender Studies. One of the cool things Carlyn did while here as an undergrad was go on the Amsterdam study abroad program. Can you tell me a little about that experience?

Carlyn Arteaga (CA): Yeah! I was actually interested in the Amsterdam program from when I was in high school!

SN: Wow!

CA: I went to an information session for James Madison and they talked about the study abroad programs and right away hearing about the Amsterdam program, I was like wow that sounds so interesting. Finally, my senior year, it made sense in my schedule with the classes I needed and that my interests had aligned more and more through the years with what the program is about, and I decided to go. It’s a five and a half weeklong program in Amsterdam and you stay in dorms there right downtown on Prinsengracht which is one of the main canals. Most people don’t live there unless they’re very rich so anytime we talked to locals and told them where we were staying, they were amazed. And then we had classes in the University of Amsterdam, but the program was run by MSU professors that came with us and everyday we had excursions and guest lectures from University of Amsterdam professors or non-profit leaders or really just so many international people from around the world.

SN: And you did this the summer of 2018 right

CA: Yes

SN: So, you had professor Ellen McCallum lead the program?

CA: Yes

SN: How did you like her?

CA: I liked her. It was interesting for me coming from James Madison. I have the Women and Gender Studies minor but have taken most of my requirements within Madison and so it was a new experience for me to be with Madison kids but have professors be women’s studies people and it’s just a different environment and discipline and I really liked getting that experience. It definitely challenged me a lot being in a different classroom…

SN: And that’s really what’s neat about being in the Women and Gender Studies program for the Amsterdam program specifically is we have lots of James Madison students on that program and you can get college credit in JMC but your instructor is a professor in English who teaches Women’s and Gender Studies and Sexuality Studies classes so it really gives you a lot of difference discipline perspectives.

CA: It was a different perspective. One of the things I loved — at first, I didn’t love it and everyone from Madison felt that way and were freaking out — but they pushed us not to write papers for our final projects. The whole time we were there we worked on these final projects on a topic of our choosing. All of these Madison kids were like “oh well I’ll write a paper” but they were like “mmh yeah don’t do that.” But it was really fun to take myself out of my comfort zone and create something I’m not used to creating. Also, on the last day we all shared our projects with each other and presented to each other and it was one of my favorite days because everyone was really passionate about what we were doing and everyone had fun but was also interested and committed to school and learning and doing their best, so the projects people created were so creative and interesting to listen to on all different topics and in all different mediums.

SN: What was your project that you did?

CA: I wanted to study how, we did a lot of studying Islamophobia in the Netherlands and how that intersects with gay rights and women’s rights. The Netherlands is pretty progressive when it comes to gay rights especially and women’s rights kind of, it’s a more nuanced picture but that’s the perception people have and the perception they have of themselves. But, at the same time, they’ve had Muslim immigrants for much longer than the refugee crisis, dating back to the 1980s and before, this in influx for a long time has caused conflict between their values around gay and women’s rights and their response to Muslim immigrants. I was interested to see where Muslim women who are domestic violence victims are caught in this. Are there extra services provided because the Dutch think they need to ‘save them from their culture’ or do they get left our because they do not want to reach out because they don’t want to perpetuate the negative stereotypes people have about their culture? Where do they land in that struggle? Normally, I’d write a paper about that, but instead, I made a brochure meant to be a quick guide for service providers for victims of domestic violence for how they could better provide services for Muslim women in the Netherlands, like myth busting, common barriers, emphasizing how you as a service provider it’s your job to make services accessible not the victims job to conform to what you expect victims to be.

SN: So really taking the academic classroom learning and putting it into an application that could actually make the lives of Muslim women in the Netherlands better.

CA: Yes!

SN: That’s wonderful.

CA: I sort of came in thinking that this topic could be an intersection I was interested in and throughout the program we had readings for each guest speaker and we continued to have guest speakers who developed on that theme, not many addressed domestic violence but still enough addressing that conflict that I got more and more interested and that helped guide my research and project.

SN: Excellent. You’re currently enrolled in the Master of Social Work program, is that correct?

CA: Yes, I’m doing the macro track

SN: Right here at MSU! So, we still have you around. It’s early in your master program, you just started a few months ago, but do you have a sense of how that experience in Amsterdam and your Women’s and Gender Studies minor generally has shaped the direction you’re going professionally? Because when you graduate, you’re thinking about having a job in social work right?

CA: Yeah so the study abroad program, the way my interests went through college, and the classes I was interested in and internships I was having, it was the perfect capstone experience for all of my interests like gendered violence and stuff with refugees, like I took Arabic, all converging. My journey into the social work program has been a smooth continuation! We spent a lot of the first few weeks of the program learning the social work code of ethics and the third principle in social work is social justice which a lot of people don’t know that about the profession, they tend to think about the clinical workers and doing like one-on-one therapy, but there’s a strong social justice and policy and political side of social work which is more what I’m doing but it all comes from a place of doing that work based on clinical experience with real people living their lives. So, I’m pursuing policy through social work which is a more qualitative way of looking at policy compared to policy programs that teach you statistical methods, which are important and we still have like research standards in social work but the core of it is listening to people and working *with* people not *for* people and also in the work I think like gender issues run all the way through whenever you’re working with vulnerable populations. This semester, my field placement is in the 30th Circuit Court Juvenile Division in the delinquencies so I’m working with juveniles on probation and at first, I was like this isn’t exactly what I’ve been doing like working with survivors but turns out I’m working with survivors. I knew that that intersection was there but didn’t realize how strongly.

SN: It was really fortuitus for you to have this capstone experience that pulled together all of your interests from James Madison, Women’s and Gender Studies, and the Amsterdam program?

CA: Yes! It felt like every day we had a different speaker on a different topic, but it felt like they were all tailored to me personally, I know they weren’t, but it felt like it. It was really exciting to go to class everyday cause every day I was like oh my gosh this is like if this person came and guest lectured at MSU I’d go to this event but instead it’s just class every day. Oh, and also, I’m biking to class along the canals of Amsterdam every and eating a croissant.

SN: Sounds like a tough life haha! There are probable students, either current MSU students or high schoolers, listening to this podcast and thinking about their options coming to MSU and what they might do. Given that you were a high school student once looking at the Amsterdam program, what would you say to those potential MSU students thinking about what they can do here?

CA: I think its important for students looking at MSU to dig beyond any big picture representation of what MSU is that it’s such a huge school there’s a niche for everyone and you really need to dig deeper if you have a specific interest already or even a direction you’re going cause there’s probably a really cool program like just for you, but you’re not gonna find it if you just think of MSU as 50,000 people.

SN: Right absolutely. Interesting too that you point out in your current master program the way gender interweaves in a lot of things which makes doing the Women and Gender Studies minor and Amsterdam program really useful to a lot of students regardless of their major.

CA: Yeah, I would agree with that and say that study abroad is something I always wanted to do. I was concerned because I didn’t want to go abroad and feel like I was paying extra for credits to go on vacation, and I didn’t want it to be like a big party or not something outside of my comfort zone. I was a little hesitant picking a Western European country where most people speak English and the people would probably look like me for the most part and like I’ve been to Europe before. But, because of how challenging the material is and how uncomfortable people get talking about the issues of sexuality and gender in the Us, it was totally taking me outside of my comfort zone.

SN: And in a good way!

CA: Yes

SN: To me that sounds like just an ideal university experience of something that helped you to grow.

CA: And MSU has lots of scholarships available for study abroad and that’s not just lip service—they really do try to help students.

SN: I’m glad you brought that up because in addition to scholarships available through colleges and departments, the GenCen provides scholarships so if you’re thinking about our Amsterdam, London, or Malawi programs, definitely apply for those scholarships. You can find all of this info and more info about the Amsterdam program on our website: gencen.isp.msu.edu. Thank you very much, Carlyn, for talking with me this morning and best of luck in your master program.

CA: Thank you for having me.