One of the things that our students learn almost immediately upon their arrival to the Dominican Republic is that different cultures have very different concepts of time. But cultural relativism aside, we can all agree that these last four months have flown by too quickly. The New Year brought with it new challenges and a new way of life to our students as they arrived to the D.R. on January 3rd, most of them not exactly sure what to expect. Over the next several months there was no shortage of fresh and unexpected experiences, some challenging, some pleasant surprises, and some laughable. As April comes to a close and students begin wondering how they’re going to stuff everything into their suitcases to get back home, the level of maturity, adaptation, inter-cultural understanding, and willingness to face new challenges is apparent in each of this semester’s fourteen participants.

Read on to find out more about how we finished out our semester. Two of our students, Daniel and Sarah, both of Lewis and Clark College, took a photography class at the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo this semester, and they have graciously provided many of the photos for this newsletter. Keep an eye out for their great work!
In her own words...

When I landed in Santo Domingo I was sure of two things. The first was that I was a Spanish major and the second, that I had no clue what I wanted to do with it. I didn’t have time in my schedule for the traditional “pasantía” or internship, but I wanted to do something, so I approached CIEE about my interest in baseball and Spanish. They found a placement for me and accompanied me on a site visit. My expectations low, but hopes high, I began volunteer work teaching English at an “academia de beisbol”. As my students and I progressed through the weeks, I realized that if I could only do one thing for the rest of my life, it would be to teach. I never would have figured this out had it not been for this opportunity. By the time I left, they were forming sentences and having conversations in ENGLISH! Teaching at the academia truly was the highlight and most gratifying experience of my time in the Dominican Republic.

-Melanie, Birmingham-Southern College

A highlight for many students in the program is the opportunity to work with local NGOs either through CIEE’s Development Internship class or as independent volunteers. This semester has been no exception, as over half of the students have dedicated large portions of their time to working with various organizations. It’s not always easy—often times students are exposed to the harsh realities that many Dominicans and Haitians confront on a daily basis, and adapting to a different work style and picking up on the intricacies of the Dominican NGO world presents challenges of its own, but the results are rewarding in the end. Most students report that not only did they feel that they were able to help out at the organization where they worked, but also that they were able to learn about how their own values influence the way that they perceive and interact with the people involved with their NGO, and that ultimately it better prepares them for their careers after graduation. Students this semester are completing internship and volunteer work in neighborhood organizations that work with children who make a living working in the streets, a boarding school with a mostly orphaned female student body, a medical clinic catering to an underserved community, several organizations that dedicate themselves to HIV/AIDS education, especially amongst members of the GLBTQ community, and a fair-trade clothing factory where employees earn dignified wages and are encouraged to unionize.
On Saturday, March 17, CIEE Santo Domingo set out on a daytrip to the city of Santiago de los Caballeros, several hours north of Santo Domingo in the fertile Cibao Valley, where students enjoyed a visit to the Centro León, one of the country’s most complete cultural centers and museums. Among the museum’s collections is a permanent anthropological exhibit teaching visitors of the historical elements that have mixed to form modern-day Dominican identity, including the “diverse aspects that Dominicanidad reflects, seen from a Caribbean, American, and global context,” with special emphasis placed on the multicultural present that can be observed daily in the Dominican Republic. Students also observed a modern art exhibit featuring popular Dominican and Caribbean artists. The daytrip was supposed to include a visit to the Hermanas Mirabal Museum in the nearby city of Salcedo, dedicated to the memory of the four sisters (three of whom were assassinated by Dictator Trujillo’s henchmen in 1960) and their families, who have become national symbols of Dominicans’ struggle to achieve liberty and freedom from censorship as well as non-violence towards women, but due to an unforeseen bridge reparation, access to the town was cut off—an example of the unforeseen conditions that often dictate life in the D.R. and add substance to one of our long-standing study abroad mottoes: be flexible! Instead of visiting the Mirabal Sisters museum, students enjoyed a leisurely walk through the historic center of Santiago, where they had the opportunity to visit a cathedral and a few plazas as well as do a bit of shopping.
Daytrip to Elias Piña

Friday, April 13th was the group’s visit to the border region of Elias Piña, a lively market town on the border between the D.R. and Haiti. Every Friday and Monday, the border is opened to enable the easy passage back and forth of merchants and buyers of items of necessity, including food staples, clothing, shoes, and electro-domestic products. There are several markets along the border Dominican-Haitian border, and they represent a huge element of both countries’ economies, as well as illustrate their vulnerability as relationships between the two nations, transportation union strikes, or threats of communicable diseases can leave the markets at a standstill. Upon arrival to Elias Piña, students first visited the border crossing, where CIEE Resident Director María Filomena Gonzalez gave them a historical and social overview of the market and its importance. Students then had free time to roam through the narrow streets flanked by market stalls—some even tried their hand at negotiating! Afterwards we had lunch and everyone got to try chenchen, a corn-based dish unique to the region. During our return to Santo Domingo, we stopped off in the town of Baní to visit the newly completed Centro Perelló, a cultural center established by the family of a highly-successful coffee company to provide better access to cultural events and high-quality educational opportunities for the town’s inhabitants. In addition to observing the exhibit on Dominican and Caribbean Carnival, students met and conversed with a group of students who have been accepted into the Ministry of Education’s highly intensive English program, which holds classes at the center. Many of CIEE’s Teach Abroad participants work with the Ministry in this same program throughout the country. CIEE students enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about the lives of these students and observe the progress that they had made in a short amount of time in their classes.
This year, CIEE celebrates its 25th year in Latin America, and it all started in the Dominican Republic. The main festivities culminated in a grand fiesta on March 9 in Santiago, but in the week leading up to the event, the CIEE Santo Domingo Study Center invited a group of guests, including CIEE Portland staff and advisors, counselors, and professors from various different sending institutions from U.S. universities to learn a bit more about our programs before kicking back and enjoying the carnival activities, musical performances, and nostalgia featured at the party. A couple of the visitors even went with María Filomena on a three-day tour of Haiti, taking advantage of her expertise after years of travelling and diplomatic work in the Dominican Republic’s neighboring country. While there, visitors learned more about the vibrant Haitian art scene, observed some of the post-earthquake reconstruction efforts, browsed the world’s largest private collection of Haitian Voodoo artifacts, and visited Partners in Health’s newly-constructed and almost-ready-to-operate public hospital in the Central Plateau region. Making it back to the Dominican Republic on time for the scheduled activities on this side of the border proved to be yet another lesson in flexibility and resourcefulness as the border crossing was briefly shut down, but in the end everything worked out. During the Santo Domingo portion of the site visit, the group enjoyed a walking tour of Santo Domingo’s historic Colonial District, the ruins of an 18th century sugar plantation that illustrates the area’s tragic and often hidden past with slavery, and the baseball academy of a scout who takes in Dominican youth with special talents in baseball and prepares them for tryouts with Major League Baseball teams in hopes of making it to the U.S. to represent their country on the baseball diamond. Additionally, they visited the three institutions where students can take their classes—Instituto Bonó, Instituto Tencológico (INTEC), and the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD)—and of course our CIEE Study Center where not only CIEE-developed courses are offered, but also an array of student services.

New Additions to the CIEE-Santo Domingo Team

This year saw the departure of Resident Coordinator and Internship Coordinator Robin Young, who over the last three and a half years had put her mark on the program with her professionalism, accessibility to students, and new ideas, especially in the area of student internships. Robin has moved back to Northern California, where she is working and living closer to her family. Beginning in December, 2011, her place has been filled by Nathaniel Thompson, the program’s Assistant Resident Director. Nathaniel had spent the previous five and a half years working as Resident Coordinator of CIEE’s Liberal Arts program in Santiago, D.R., and the Colorado native was happy to move two hours closer to the Equator to take on a new role in Santo Domingo. In addition to his responsibilities as Assistant Resident Director, he will also be Resident Director of CIEE’s new Sports and Society: Baseball in Context summer program, a six-week look into the world of baseball in the D.R. beginning this June.

Another new face to the Santo Domingo Study Center is Lina Arriaga, the Health, Housing, and Excursion Coordinator. Lina began working with CIEE in November of 2011 after completing a master’s degree in Human Resources from the Center for Finance Studies in Madrid, Spain. Previously, she worked in the human resources department of a local medical clinic. One of Lina’s responsibilities is to make sure that students remain healthy and safe during their time in the D.R. In the event that anyone falls ill, she is always available to accompany students to the clinic and help them through the often intimidating process or receiving medical attention. She also coordinates all of the excursions, daytrips and extra-curricular activities that occur throughout the semester, as well as coordinates student housing with host families.
The CIEE Study Center in Santo Domingo is designed for students who want to improve their Spanish language skills while studying contemporary social issues that affect Latin America and specifically the Caribbean region. Through its course offering at four different academic institutions, a wide variety of courses may be taken by CIEE students. From very early in the program, students are encouraged to create goals for the semester and analyze the ways in which those goals can be met, as well as consider how they may address the potential challenges to meeting those goals. Several times throughout the semester, students revisit these goals in order to assess their progress, so that in the end each student has a successful and worthwhile semester.

If you have any questions about our program or our Study Center, we are happy to assist you!

Maria Filomena Gonzalez, Resident Director
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Nathaniel Thompson, Assistant Resident Director
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Photos: above: The group during their going away party; The CIEE Santo Domingo team (descending the stairs): Elvin, Lina, Mayra, Yasmilda, Nathaniel, Hector, Maria, and Nena, CIEE’s furry, faithful companion.
Too much talk, not enough visuals? Here’s some more photos taken throughout the semester:

Sunset in Santo Domingo. Photo by Daniel.

CIEE students with their Dominican classmates at the Instituto Bonó.

A street scene in Elias Piña. Photo by Sarah.

Students roam the streets of Santo Domingo’s Colonial City. Photo by Sarah.

A procession during Semana Santa (Easter Week). Photo by Sarah.

Joey (Tufts), Julia (Gettysburg), and Michelle (Gordon) getting ready for class at the CIEE Study Center.

A scene from Carnaval. Photo by Sarah.

Sunset over the Caribbean Sea. Photo by Daniel.

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