

National Study Abroad Day - Professor Jessica Yinka Thomas

[Opening Music, plays continually through the introduction]

Hello and welcome to this episode of Global, Here and Now - a podcast where the Poole College of Management Global Programs team showcases a variety of unique ways to engage globally. I'm your host Ellen Frost and today, we are celebrating National Study Abroad Day! Now, Let's Go Global!

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February 22, 2021 marks the second annual National Study Abroad Day. The goal of this event is to celebrate the lasting impacts study abroad has on alumni. On the Global, Here and Now podcast, we have talked to several current undergraduate students about their international experiences, but today, we want to talk to Poole College of Management faculty and staff about their own study abroad experiences including some of their fondest memories and the impact studying abroad still has on their life and career today.

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Our next guest is Jessica Yinka Thomas, an assistant professor of practice in the Poole College of Management and also Director of Business Sustainability Collaborative. Ms. Thomas has over 15 years of experience working in sustainable enterprise, social innovation and business development and is a co-founder of B Academics, a community working to advance the state of academic study into business as a force for good. She received her undergraduate degree in Engineering from Stanford University where she studied abroad for a semester in Paris, France. While completing her MBA from Duke University, she traveled to South Africa, Zambia and Botswana through the Global Academic Travel Experience program. Beyond these experiences, Ms. Thomas has lived and worked around the world and brings a global perspective to her many different projects and initiatives.

Ellen Frost: Professor Thomas, thank you for joining us today.

Jessica Thomas: Absolutely, I am delighted Thank you so much for the invitation to share my experience.

Ellen Frost: Absolutely so we're going to jump right in to talk about your experiences studying abroad, can you share with us how you decided to study abroad during undergrad and then what drew you to France.

Jessica Thomas: course, so I would have to start out with how I grew up so i'm i'm half American and half Nigerian and I grew up. Living between the US and Nigeria and also Senegal in West Africa, which is a francophone country so when I was studying engineering at Stanford my major was an interdisciplinary major. called product design, so it combined mechanical

engineering Art and Design, and I really wanted to explore that art. Design side of my major and do something, you know unusual out of the ordinary for my engineering major, and so it was really excited about the opportunity offered through Sanford to do a quarter. We were on the quarter system, so a quarter abroad in Paris and I picked Paris because of my I went to a French Lee say a French school. For seven years growing up and really wanted to build off of that language experience and to continue to try to maintain my my fluency in French and also just to explore completely new city, a new country and really just have a new, you know, a new a new experience. To add to my my you know very interdisciplinary major.

Ellen Frost: yeah and I love how the program sounds like it combined some personal interests with the language and the culture, but with your academic interests and needs as well, from my perspective, that's kind of a perfect fit for a study abroad experience.

Jessica Thomas: Absolutely, it was the perfect combination and, if I can tell it a side story, I might have tried to make it a little bit too perfect because before I went on the study abroad. I mentioned, having I was taking an engineering major the sequence of classes was very strict, so I had kind of this really clearly laid out sequence. And so I didn't want to miss one of the engineering classes in the sequence, and that class was actually taught by David Kelly. Who is one of the co founders of ideo so one of the thought leaders in the design thinking and product design space, so I remember setting up a meeting with David Kelly, I rode my bicycle. down to Palo Alto to the ideo offices and I pitched to David Kelly on taking his class remotely from Paris. He agreed, he was skeptical he didn't think I could make it work but. I made a convincing argument I convinced them to let me take his class from Paris. And Lo and behold, a few weeks after getting there I dropped the class I realized I had bitten off too much, I wanted to maintain that engineering focus and stay on track, but I realized there was so much to explore. And I just wanted to make the most of that experience and so trying to find hardware stores in Paris and machine shop where I could work on prototypes was just not good works.

Ellen Frost: That that's awesome and I think that's a good lesson to share with those in the scene that's great so i'm thinking about your time in Paris not looking for hardware stores. Can you share one or two highlights from your time abroad.

Jessica Thomas: Yes, so I was really thinking about this and it's so interesting because what I really remember. And what really stood out to me from my time I mean I think beyond what you might imagine just like you know exploring the city by foot and enjoying you know the food and the art and the culture. And you know meeting people from all over the world, one of the memories, I will you know that will stay with me forever was actually cooking in our dorm. So. You know, we stayed in a dorm and there were students from all over the world from different exchange programs in this dorm. And I remember, I used to, and I still do had this this dish I mean interesting enough it's it's a Vietnamese this dish honey chicken. That I used to love to make when I was in college and I just remember the experience of going with you know just some of my friends from different programs different places around the world. To the Asian market in Paris to buy all the ingredients for this dish which were somewhat unusual you couldn't find them and kind of. Our regulars to Belmont Shay and then coming back to the dorm

room and cooking up this meal right, this is the enemy's meal. In Paris and then we just had all these people come to the kitchen because they smelled. This dish cooking and people would come and say what are you cooking what are you making that smell so amazing. And so we just had this I just remember having this beautiful meal in this dorm with all of these you know fellow students from around the world. After we've had this adventure at the market and it just reminds me how much food right and cooking connects us and brings people together and just enjoy and so yeah for me that was just that's one of the memories that just stays with me of that that exchange experience.

Ellen Frost: yeah I love that and I love the fact that you point out that you not only make connections with locals so people for you in Paris or from the French heritage, but also people from around the world, maybe other American students who are there, maybe students from around the world that you're experiencing this together, I think that's. An important part for students to know that when you study abroad, yes you're exploring one culture or one area of the world, but you're probably meeting people from all different backgrounds and cultures, which is very cool. Absolutely so let's transition a little bit to your graduate school experience, which was in southern Africa as part of your MBA program how was studying abroad in graduate school different from your time in France, and what was that experience like.

Jessica Thomas: Yes, so when I was getting my MBA at the fuqua school of business at Duke I took advantage of an opportunity to take a class called the global academic travel experience. And, unlike the study abroad in Paris, so I spent an entire quarter in Paris and got a chance to you know take classes there and get very immersed in the culture. This was a course where essentially we were studying southern Africa from Durham. Over the course of the Semester and so we're studying the economic, the political climate, you know business climate, and then we had a two week in country experience at the end of the Semester, and so it was so much more condensed. And it was very I was getting an MBA so it was very business focused and very structured so it was a lot of you know, really interesting and engaging experiences. You know meeting with social entrepreneurs who were running their business out of you know, a shipping container to you know going into you know meet with executives from multinational. Companies that were that were based in in South Africa. There was a component, where we actually got an opportunity, so it was primarily in South Africa, but we had an opportunity to travel to Botswana and go on a safari so I was a little bit less kind of structured and and you know with a business focus. And then also had an opportunity to travel to Zambia. and meet with and explore, you know the business context and Zambia as well, but it was you know just a completely different, you know different part of the world. You know, as as an African as a Nigerian you know, for me, I felt a you know, a very strong connection, you know traveling and meeting people and learning more about you know the cultural and business and political context in southern Africa. But it was just a lot shorter and a lot more structured and I think there's benefits to both models of study abroad experiences and i'm really glad, even though I didn't have a chance to spend an entire semester there i'm really thankful that I that I had that opportunity.

Ellen Frost: yeah I love that you highlight the benefits of both formats, I think a lot of students look at all the different types of programs that are available in terms of length geography. Area of study that you're doing and I think you've highlighted that all experiences are beneficial in their own way, and you know have positive memories they're just different that the type of experience, you have will be different so. that's the, thank you for sharing that and pointing that out so thinking about your work now as both a faculty Member and the director of the business sustainability collaborative how do your global experiences impact that current work.

Jessica Thomas: Absolutely such a great question so much of my work right now is focused on preparing future leaders to use business as a force for good to use business as an engine. to drive social, environmental and economic value, and I think both from my experience my experiences growing up in the US and in West Africa from my experiences like you know studying abroad in Paris and in southern Africa. You know, for me, that really always reminds me of the power of bringing together people from different backgrounds, different cultures, you know the power of learning from each other to solve the challenges that we face, and that you know there's just different expertise. You know, different different values different approaches and we need all of those perspectives right and we need all of those different experiences. When it comes to you know this challenge that we faced as a global community is, how can we. How can we use business as an engine right to address the both the local and global challenges that we face, and so I think those all of those experiences, you know together, you know inspired me. remind me especially just having this conversation with you of how urgent those issues are right and how important the work that we're that we're doing is, and so I feel very fortunate to you know, be able to bring those experiences and bring those networks. You know, to inform you know the work that i'm doing in the classroom the work that i'm doing through the business sustainability collaborative.

Ellen Frost: yeah and I think you've touched a little bit about kind of why this is important, but for the students listening so for those future business leaders. What advice, do you have for them in terms of as they think about engaging globally and preparing to use engine as a force for good in the future.

Jessica Thomas: I would say, you know. pursue as many global experiences, as you can, as your schedule at you know it's certainly a financial commitment, you know as you can and do so with with an open heart right with an eye towards learning towards connecting. And let yourself, you know be inspired right let yourself be educated and whether it's a week long experience or a semester long experience war or longer you know make make the most of it. and yeah I think the world will be better off for it, you will be better off for it and yeah I think we really need to build more more bridges more connections. Because I think in order to solve these challenges that we face we're going to need to innovate right in ways that we never have before and I think. In in many instances innovation comes from bringing together ideas, bringing together concepts, bringing together people who haven't connected before.

Ellen Frost: Excellent well Thank you so much for joining us today, it was really interesting inspiring to hear about all of your experiences and how those stay with you and inform the work that you're doing so we really appreciate it.

Jessica Thomas: Well, thank you so much for giving me this opportunity to reflect on those experiences and and share them, I really appreciate it.

[Transition music]

Closing

As you can see, study abroad experiences have a long impact on those who participate in them. While you may only study abroad for a summer or a semester, the experience will continue to benefit you as you apply for jobs, travel more, and connect with others. For the current students listening, I encourage you to ask your professors and supervisors if they studied abroad. You can also check out our website and Instagram page to see more highlights of faculty and staff who've studied abroad.

Happy National Study Abroad Day, everyone! We are always grateful for a chance to talk to more people about their study abroad experiences. Thanks for listening to this episode of Global, Here and Now presented by the Poole College of Management at NC State. For more information and to listen to other episodes, please visit our website at go.ncsu.edu/pooleglobal. Stay safe, stay well and stay globally engaged.

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