Letter to Prospective Students

I went about the IYFD program a little bit backwards. I had already finished two years of service as an Environmental Educator with Peace Corps Paraguay, and was looking to further develop my theoretical and practical skills for working with youth of other cultures. Peace Corps had been a serious challenge for me, and while I was proud of my personal and professional accomplishments, I wanted to try again with a few more skills in my toolbox. IYFD provided me with this opportunity.

This program is a great fit for students who are self-directed and have specific ideas of what they want to get out of the experience. You only have one year to fit in your coursework and absorb ideas from your professors and cohort members, so it is important to make the most of your time. Because so many of your courses are electives, it can be helpful to select a certificate program to compliment the core graduate classes. This gives an element of focus to your studies, and can expose you to different project ideas to utilize in your internship.

More than anything, the IYFD coursework helped me to develop patience, and honed my ability to reflect on a troubling situation. Working abroad can be anxiety producing and confusing, and through this program I have gotten better at taking a deep breath and sorting through the confusion at my own pace. By developing an understanding of my own cultural biases I can better see the source of interpersonal discomfort when working with those of another culture. This is critical in developing a positive working relationship with others, both abroad and at home. In addition to these “soft skills,” the program also provides technical information on conflict resolution, youth development and other subjects.
I also appreciated IYFD’s focus on practical experience in addition to academic study. I am a very academic person, and I chose this program specifically because I needed more hands-on experience to round out my professional self. Signing up for a local internship is a great way to maximize your experience, and test out the theories you are learning in class.

Having served in the Peace Corps before enrolling in the IYFD program, I can say first-hand that the skills learned in IYFD would have been extremely useful as a Peace Corps Volunteer! I completed my intercultural internship through the Peace Corps Response program in El Salvador, and my work benefitted from both my experience in Paraguay and the skills I developed through IYFD. Looking back, I can only imagine that my time in Paraguay would have been much more productive (and more comfortable!) had I gone into it possessing these skills.

That said, working abroad is sure to be a life-changing experience, and will certainly present you with difficult challenges. There will certainly be moments where you don’t want to leave your house, miss your loved ones back home, are sick of feeling different from everyone around you, or want nothing more than your favorite food and a day without humidity. But you will also connect with people that you’ll care about for the rest of your life, gain professional experience you can’t duplicate at home, and learn to understand a different side of reality. Not a bad way to get a Master’s degree!

As you investigate the IYFD program, think about your professional goals and how they align with the skills you can develop through the program’s coursework and internship requirements. If it seems like a good match, then apply for the program knowing that you are in for a life-changing experience. Best of luck!