There is no doubt that Stanford is one of the preeminent research institutions in the world, providing its students with unparalleled resources and opportunities to foster their diverse research interests. One of Stanford’s research outlets that has maintained a remarkably low profile over the years is its overseas research opportunities. Recipients of awards, such as URO grants and Chappell-Lougee scholarships, often opt to conduct research projects, not on campus or even within the United States, but rather overseas. Overseas research invariably results in immensely rewarding experiences on both an academic and a personal level.

Carly Schuster and Nadiya Figueroa are two Stanford students whose research projects epitomize both the advantages and obstacles offered by research abroad. Long fascinated by Argentina’s unique economic and political situation, Schuster, a junior, elected to complement her study abroad in Argentina with a research project. To that end, Schuster used her $2,500 Chappell-Lougee scholarship to examine microlending to women in the Argentine altiplano, a subject with ties to her independently designed major, Women and Development. Schuster first made arrangements to study in Buenos Aires through Stanford’s Overseas Study Program (OSP), intending to “get a feel for the political situation and make vital contacts while being safely taken care of in the Stanford facility.” To Schuster’s dismay, she arrived in Buenos Aires to discover that the non-governmental organization (NGO), with which she had hoped to collaborate on her research, no longer existed, requiring her to actively search for other contacts and organizations. After her study in Buenos Aires, Schuster spent the summer in a rural region of northern Argentina, near its shared border with Bolivia. Schuster was able to closely examine the altiplano’s unique system of microlending—or what Schuster described as “a system of small loans aimed at women to foster grassroots economic development.” Schuster observed a series of meetings between the microlending NGO and a female artisan cooperative in which terms of financial transfers were worked out. The strategic and political nuances of these interactions will serve as the focal point of Schuster’s honors thesis, currently in progress.

For senior Nadiya Figueroa, a History and Cultural and Social Anthropology double-major, the decision to conduct research overseas was an easy one. A native Jamaican, Figueroa was disappointed by the somewhat surprising fact that Stanford did not have professors specializing in Caribbean studies. Rather than give up on her academic curiosity about the region, Figueroa proactively crafted a research project that permitted her to explore her academic interest in the Caribbean, specifically in her Jamaican homeland. Using her URO major grant, Figueroa sought to study the elite members of the Jamaican Diaspora, their motivations for leaving Jamaica, and how they perceived themselves contributing to Jamaica. Though Jamaica is a country of only 2.5 million people, some estimates suggest that between 2 and 3 million additional Jamaicans live outside the country. More troubling to Figueroa was the fact that 70% of college-educated Jamaicans no longer lived on the island, a phenomenon known as the Jamaican brain drain. Figueroa hoped her research would shed light on how modern Jamaica could harness these emigrants’ intellectual and economic capital. For Figueroa this research project was especially gratifying. Her research directly spoke to her as a member of the Diaspora contemplating how to contribute to her homeland in the future. After the lengthy process of compiling a subject population, with the assistance of the Jamaican Consul General in New York, the Jamaican Ambassador to the United Nations, and family friends, Figueroa had the chance to conduct numerous interviews with Jamaicans educated in North America. Though the interviews were largely held in Jamaica, Figueroa also traveled to San Francisco, New York, and Philadelphia to interview prominent members of these cities’ Jamaican populations. Figueroa found that interview-
ees frequently related to her and became sentimental. She recalls an interviewee who broke into tears while recounting his experience as a member of the Diaspora. Having conducted such emotional and informative interviews, Figueroa has found the entire research process very meaningful. Like Schuster, she intends to incorporate the findings gleaned from her extensive interviews into her honors thesis.

The unique experiences of Schuster and Figueroa serve as testaments to the meaningful and diverse nature of the overseas research opportunities offered by Stanford. Although the topics and locations of their research differed, their experiences highlight many common advantages and benefits that research abroad can offer. Foremost, overseas research offers an unparalleled degree of proximity to research contacts, making for better interviews compared to email or telephone correspondence. Schuster stated, “although I probably would have been able to establish some contact via telephone, to be able to sit down with an Argentine grandmother and discuss her llama herd was simply incomparable to collecting information from Stanford.”

Drawing on her experiences in Jamaica, Figueroa concurred, saying that “doing interviews in person and doing research on location is an inspiring and stimulating process which has the power to shape one’s research in a way that other contact cannot. Research on location gives the researcher a sense of purpose and of context.” Being on-site to conduct their research enabled both researchers to access firsthand information and experiences that inspired them on academic and personal levels.

However, just as overseas research offers unique benefits to the researcher, it also presents a host of obstacles that typical on-campus or domestic research would almost certainly not entail. Most obviously, a language barrier might prove a formidable obstacle, preventing the forging of contacts and severely slowing the interview process.

Proficient in Spanish, and having just spent a quarter in Buenos Aires, Schuster reflected, “though I typically managed to understand 80% of what was being said in an interview, different dialects and colloquialisms made complete comprehension nearly impossible. There was still a valuable 20% that I was missing out on.” Additionally, anti-American sentiment and preconceived notions of American culture often made setting up appointments and arranging interviews difficult.

Arriving in Argentina a mere four days after the announcement of the war in Iraq, Schuster observed ambivalence in the Argentines, “Although the groups I was working with wanted to have the Stanford name attached to their cause, they were deeply suspicious of the West and of a white person poking around for information.”

Though part of the allure of overseas research lies in its physical detachment from Stanford’s campus, the importance of having a good advisor to stay in touch with while abroad cannot be overstated, according to both Figueroa and Schuster. Figueroa’s advisor made a concerted “effort to maintain email contact, recommending books and magazines which she felt would be pertinent to the research being done.” In slight contrast, Schuster’s contact with her advisor while overseas was not nearly as frequent, mainly because the closest internet connection was three hours away in neighboring Bolivia. Schuster described her advisor as “hands-off in a positive, supportive way—steering [her] in the right direction whenever possible.” Having an advisor who takes a genuine interest in the research being done provides not only a reassuring link to Stanford when abroad, but also a sense of security which, said Figueroa, “allowed me to become immersed in what I was doing without worrying.”

While these overseas research projects have already proven to be highlights of their researchers’ respective Stanford careers, it is evident that their experiences will also figure prominently in their futures. Schuster had long considered development studies an area of interest, and her research experience in Argentina solidified her desire to pursue this topic in her academics and her future career. Figueroa described her research project in Jamaica as having provided her with “interesting insight through its reflexive nature,” insight that has reaffirmed her will to pursue a Master’s in International Relations in Jamaica and to ultimately work there.

Though a great deal of discipline, organization, and personal initiative is required to plan an overseas research project, and though there are many obstacles, the experiences of both Schuster and Figueroa leave no doubt that conducting research in another country is a phenomenal experience that Stanford students can benefit a great deal from. Both researchers speak glowingly of their experiences and encourage their fellow students to take advantage of this program. In her final reflections on her overseas experience, Figueroa spoke to the amazing power of research abroad by commenting that a student has “only four years at Stanford, and so much of that time is spent studying. To be able to construct a project someplace other than Stanford truly can broaden horizons, spark interests, and create experiences that really will last a lifetime.”