Spending my first summer after college abroad was the best decision I have made so far in my life. I had a pretty easy first year of college. I only moved 30 minutes away from where I grew up, I lived in a sorority house with girls I made fast friends with, and I still lived 15 minutes away from my high school boyfriend. I did some volunteer work throughout the year and took some interesting classes, but nothing that stretched me too thin. In high school, I did everything and had aspirations to get far, far away for college, meet people completely different from me, and become the passionate, independent person I thought college made people into be. During winter quarter, I began to think about what I would do in the summer. I did not want to go home to Everett and return to my old job and my old self. I did not want to spend my summer living in a fraternity for so many reasons. And at the time, I wasn’t set on my major or career path enough to take summer courses or put a lot of effort into an internship I wasn’t sure that I wanted. So on a whim, I applied to study abroad programs. My choice to go to Montpellier was one of convenience. I knew I needed language credits, I had taken some French in high school, and the program was open admission. I also wanted to go somewhere that I would not know other people. Because of the things I mentioned earlier, I never felt pushed to be independent in college. I was still somebody’s girlfriend, a sorority member, and close to home. All of this combined left me itching to get out of my comfort zone.

This summer, I traveled alone to Europe for the first time. I spent the longest amount of time I ever spent away from home. It was also the first time I had entered into an experience of this gravity knowing so little about the program, where I was living, and the people I would be meeting. Throughout the two months I stayed in Montpellier, I made friends within my program I will have for the rest of my life. I studied French language with students from Russia, Colombia, Syria, and China, as well as from the United States and countries across Europe. I met people while traveling around Europe with backgrounds and experiences I could never imagine. While I entered into this program expecting to be immersed in French culture, I found that I learned just as much from the people I met about their differing backgrounds, as I did from living in this country. This was exciting, especially after being at UW for a year and coming to find out that most people I meet are from Washington or California on the more exotic side. The relationships I created this summer made me feel at home in a foreign place and taught me more than I could have imagined about cultures across the globe.

Many of the experiences I had this summer pushed me to the realization that I can begin to do more with my life currently than be a college student. I met many inspiring people and realized that if I have a passion I want to explore, now is the time to do it. Since I have been home, I have been hired and began working my first internship for a Seattle City Council campaign. I began applying to internships while still abroad, knowing that I could not come home and just do nothing. I also have applied to my first major. I have applied to the Political Science major and am waiting to hear back this autumn quarter. I also now know that I want to double major. I have room in my schedule, and after this summer, a desire to learn and do more. I am now trying to decide on what that second major may be—initially I wanted to major in Communications or Law, Societies, and Justice. Now, I am considering a path that will allow me to continue studying French language.

If I had to change anything about my experience, I think I would have tried to travel more in the areas surrounding Montpellier. Because class got out around one everyday most afternoons I would spend with friends around the city. This was positive because by the end of two months, I really felt like I lived in Montpellier. On the other hand, it would have been nice to explore other nearby cities as well. If I could have stayed longer to travel afterwards that would have been incredible. Unfortunately nobody from home was able to come and travel with me, and I did not want to be forced to travel alone.

The greatest lesson I learned this summer was one of independence. I had always considered myself an independent person, but had begun to doubt that over my first year of college. Challenging myself to take on this experience, as well as living alone for the first time in my life, I feel reassured that I can do anything I want to do, and I can do it by myself. Returning home has been exciting to see all of the people that I missed and remember the strong support system that I have here, but I will never lose the growth and experiences that I had this summer.