Beyond the Alps: High Elevations, High Expectations

#### A study abroad reflection by Taylor Talbert

In August of 2024, I had the opportunity to study abroad for nine days in the heart of Switzerland. I went with seven other students and one faculty advisor. While there, we were surrounded by agriculture, education, culture, stories, and amazing scenery. This was my third study abroad trip and second immersed in agriculture. Nothing makes me more excited to learn than being surrounded by new things!

### Day 1

The first day we had a travel day. Traveling from Chicago, Illinois to Zurich, Switzerland was comfortable for me. I sat with Claire on the end of an aisle we had to ourselves. My biggest take away from landing in Switzerland, was the immediate views. Through the airplane window, you could see postcard pictures of mountains, hills, white houses with brown roofs, cows, and all the green. It really made me stop and think about just how vastly different our world is. How do people feel when they land in our flat Midwestern cities when they come from such lush mountain landscapes? Or do they even notice and are they amazed by our urban skylines?

### Day 2

This was another travel day from Zurich to Interlaken where we would spend most of the trip. The train ride from Zurich was one of the coolest experiences I have ever had. I felt like a kid on the Polar Express trying my best to see every angle of the train and get the best photos. The “oohhs” and “aahhs” coming from our seats didn’t disappoint either. We definitely felt like tourists, but it was an amazing experience we couldn’t duplicate if we tried.

### Day 3

Our third day began our full immersion into agriculture. The nine of us along with the IFAJ Young Leaders went to Bern University to learn more about agricultural communications in Switzerland and in the Young Leaders home countries.

I was partnered with two students from Switzerland and the Young Leader from Austria. We really focused on the United States and Austria when having our discussions. While I spent my time learning about agricultural communications, how to communicate, and who to communicate to, I had never taken a large scope back.

In the U.S. we are blessed with many different forms of ag comm and different variations when you go around the country. They had so many questions about RFD TV and how that is even a thing. The more I thought about it the more I concluded that to have that conversation we would have to break the U.S. up into regions and discuss various communications that way. We don’t all farm the same, and we don’t all worry about the same things. While there is a bit of overlap, it isn’t enough to make a default decision on ONE way we communicate. Oh, how amazing that is! The possibilities are endless.

That evening we had the dinner cruise, which was quite possibly one of my top five favorite things of the trip. Good food, great laughs, and the best people.

### Day 4

Day four was our ‘learning’ day. We sat in conferences learning about sustainability in Switzerland, hearing about the issues they are facing, how they are combating the issues, new technologies, food labels, and even research. It was cool to hear from so many people who are passionate about the work they are doing, and excited to be sharing it with communicators from around the world.

While this wasn’t my favorite thing about the trip because it was hard to stay awake after long hours of travel and learning, it was insightful to hear from so many people in such a short amount of time. The highlight had to be Jeff Rowe of Syngenta Group. His presentation was great and meeting him was also pretty cool as he took an interest in our education and part in the future of ag.

### Day 5

Tour day! While we had to be up super early, traveling half of the country in the span of a day was so cool. Driving our bus up in the mountains, to go from farm to farm is an experience I’ll never forget. Telling jokes in the back of the bus, laughing, learning more than I knew I could was amazing. We would stop to unload and learn all we could about ag and then learn about each other.

We got to see lots of cows, pigs, and produce on this trip. My two favorite meals also came from the tour. The beef we had at Kbierhof for dinner and the Birchermuesli we had at the Hagmann family farm couldn’t be beat the whole trip.

Outside of the food, it was cool to see how different each farmer used sustainable practices and regenerative agriculture to advance their farm. From the “Curtis Orchard” like practices at the first farm to the beer massages at the last farm the diversity mirrored what it could look like in the U.S. too.

### Day 6

My favorite day! In the morning, we went to a farm to learn our final lessons about Swiss agriculture. What a rainy day it was! After lunch we all loaded a train and began our journey to the top of Europe. While I am not a very big fan of heights, this was my favorite thing. Taking the gondola to the top, seeing cows in the Swiss Alps, climbing a glacier, walking through an ‘ice palace,’ and coming down to dinner was the coolest thing I’ve ever done!

### Day 7

The seventh day was another travel day, but this time in a different direction. We went from Interlaken to Zurich. On our way we passed through the mountains, around the lakes, and into the city. We ended our day with AIR CONDITIONING for the first time in days and good Italian food.

### Day 8

Day eight was our final day of adventures. We spent it catching trains in Zurich around the city and we went shopping. Spent money and had the most expensive fondue meal (out of our pocket). It was yet another day full of laughter and joy. For the girls at least, it’s hard to tell if Dr. Roberts and Easton enjoyed it as much as we did.

### Day 9

We left for home early on Tuesday and arrived back in the states all safe and sound ready to start our school year the following week!

Overall, Switzerland was an experience I won’t ever be able to match again! From learning about agriculture, spending time with new and old friends, and seeing things you only can in Switzerland, it was a trip for the ages.