

# Backpack Leadership

## Lessons learned from across the pond

By Jen Miller

**U**niversity of Tampa grad and former editor of the campus paper, The Minaret, Jen Miller spent spring semester 2001 studying in England and came home with more than souvenirs. Now, she shares how travel built her up as a leader with skills she could use back home.

When I was given the chance to study abroad at **Oxford University** in England, I was both excited and scared.

Deciding to go was the most important thing I've done to become a better leader—and I didn't even know it. Through my failures and triumphs, I learned key skills that any campus leader needs in order to be successful.

### Courage

My first day there was a disaster. I was terrified. I had never left the United States—in fact, the farthest west I'd ever gone was Tampa. While toting two oversized and overstuffed suitcases, a backpack, and a duffle bag, I found myself more than lost in Heathrow airport in London—one of the largest in the world. My arm muscles gave out, and all I could think of were my parents' warnings about European thieves who prey on young American females. So I sat on my luggage and cried. Someone could have come up to me and said, "Excuse me, ma'am. I'm a professional pickpocket. Could I have your wallet, passport, and travelers' checks, please?" and I would have handed them over.

While I was afraid to go on this trip by myself, I found out that I could do it on my own. It gave me the courage to take on challenges that had no tangible solution, to take risks. Sometimes, just the journey's fun.

### A Broader Perspective

Any time you go to a foreign country, you can't help but feel like you're part of a global community. The U.S. can make you feel as if nothing exists outside our boundaries. By living in a country that's an amalgam of different nationalities and so small that it's pushed and swayed easily by the actions of other countries, I could feel a global influence. This included learning about other countries and accepting their views and values. Instead of judging their different ways of life, I learned about them. When I returned home, I started doing this with everyone.

### Patience

I was lost in Athens, Greece, when two elderly men came up to me and tried

to help me find my way, even though my map was in English, which neither of them spoke. For nearly a half hour, they scratched their heads and pointed this way and that until they sent me safely on my way—all without sharing a common language. Even when I was in England and sharing a common language, I was the foreigner in dealing with the culture, dialect, and social practices. When I flubbed a commonality (such as forgetting to use a strainer for tea and dumping leaves in my cup) or vocabulary (saying "sweatpants" instead of "jogging trousers"), people took their time to show me the English way of doing and saying things.

It was in times like these that I realized what a difference patience can make. At home, I showed the same patience to new staff writers who were essentially foreigners to journalism. I took more time with freshmen, especially those who had just moved far from home. I would mentor them, not just in writing but also in adjusting to college.

### Time Management

Oxford works on the tutorial system where you meet with the professor one-on-one only once a week. You get a topic and write an eight-page paper for the next session.

While I enjoyed the freedom of the tutorial system, it forced me to develop time-management skills. There were no mandatory classes or even lectures. I had to set aside time each day to work on my papers, whether it was in the library, typing, or revising. I also had to find people to edit my work for lack of classmates.

The experience also reminded me that I was in school to learn, which is easy to forget between constant meetings and activities. I focused on education, setting other things aside when I had that paper to write or assignment to read, yet I still had time to be involved and even take on more responsibilities.

### Stepping Out

While the Oxford experience helped me to grow as a leader, it also helped me grow as a person. I was willing to take new risks, both professionally and personally. I wasn't

afraid to try new things or to go to new places. I had widened my views and goals.

When I returned in the spring, I was nearly fired because of my previous "lack of people skills." However, I turned it around for the fall, and we had a record high number of staff members. Our paper, the University of Tampa *Minaret*, was awarded Honorable Mention in the *Florida Leader* best private college newspaper category in 2002—not bad for a newspaper that hadn't won an award since 1980. I also took top honors in the Society of Professional Journalists "Mark of Excellence" award for editorial writing in Region Three, and now I'm a national finalist. All this because, as a staff, we took risks in trying out new ideas, and as



COURTESY JEN MILLER

Traveling abroad in England and Greece gave Jen Miller the chance to study, sightsee, and develop her leadership skills.

a writer, I wrote about topics that I had shied away from before out of fear.

I tried new things: homecoming court, writing contests, and speaking at graduation. They all happened just because I tried. And sometimes, I took a risk and failed, but why not try? I'm applying for a Rhodes Scholarship this fall, which would take me back to England for another two years of study, but it's incredibly difficult to get (32 students are picked out of nearly a thousand). But how will I know if I don't try? 🐾

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