As I walked down the steps exiting Copenhagen Central Station, I noticed the hanging streetlights. They weren’t fastened to poles or attached to stoplights as I was accustomed. Nope, they hung- suspended from wires right over the middle of the street. I was seriously amazed in part because the streetlights were hanging, but more so because streetlights, an ordinary fixture, captured so much of my interest. When envisioning the wonder I would feel by being in Denmark, I never thought the streetlights would leave me with such awe. Nyhavn- yes. Christiansborg- definitely. Streetlights- absolutely not.

My sense of wonder and excitement steadily declined as the evening stretched into night. It took me less than one hour to wash my laundry, but more than four to properly dry, and I was struck by astonishment rather than awe after receiving my dinner bill. The next night a booking database error accidentally cancelled the remaining 8 nights of my reservation. The morning after, I woke up with terrible food poisoning. So terrible, the hostel staff called 1813 (the Danish medical helpline) in which a nurse referred me to Hvidovre Hospital. After six hours acquainting myself with Danish emergency medical care, I journey my way back to central Copenhagen via bus, bought some jam and bread on an anxiety filled trip to the grocery store, and returned to my thankfully empty hostel dorm room to watch a movie on Netflix. Despite my ordeal, I surprisingly felt at home. That day I had visited the hospital, shopped for groceries, and took public transit- activities most other tourists wouldn’t do. While these anecdotes only provide a snapshot of my time in Denmark, they capture everything I didn’t expect to happen on my trip, and these incidents added to the richness of my experience.

Transitioning from tourist to student deepened my comfort level in Denmark. The morning bike ride from my kollegium (a hybrid dorm/apartment) to class was more than just a simple commute- it was another way in which I interacted with the city and its inhabitants. I was part of the ‘daily grind’ that existed in Copenhagen. Again, partaking in mundane acts such as commuting or grocery shopping or even cleaning my apartment rounded out my journey. Any doubts that I would have about living in Denmark ceased to exist. I knew and felt that I loved it there. For three amazing weeks, I experienced Copenhagen, and with the added bonus of studying positive psychology.

In simple terms, positive psychology is the study of achieving happiness, or a positive well-being, and there is no better place to study happiness than in the country consistently ranked as being the home to the world’s happiest people. I had never heard of the subject before DIS, my study abroad program. However, the course led my to analyze, question, and understand the field of positive psychology and its connection to Danish society and culture. I was tasked with observing and interviewing Danes about the claim that they are the happiest people. Ask a Dane why “they are the happiest people in the world,” and most will vehemently respond that they are not, but then most will vehemently proceed to tell you why they might be. Although paradoxical, their response made sense to me. The Danes have been oversaturated with the results of these surveys, the media coverage, and the numerous books on the topic. It is nearly impossible for the topic to not be in the public discourse. Eventually I became completely captivated with the topic and the responses it induced, compelling me to adopt the topic of ‘the commodification of Danish happiness’ for my senior thesis. In other words, I will study how one can package Danish happiness and export it. Among other publications, there is now a cookbook, a parenting book, and a how-to guide all relaying the same message: it’s all in the culture.

The day after I returned to California, I told myself I needed to go back. Longing plagued me as I settled back into my lackluster suburb. I didn’t ride my bike to class each morning nor did I spend countless hours at the park reading and people watching. When I returned to work and school though, my friends couldn’t shut me up about what I learned in class and experienced. I knew what I needed to do and I had a route planned to get there: a 13-month paid internship with DIS. Every year my study abroad program hires a new batch of DIS alumni to assist faculty with program development and lead students on study tours throughout Denmark and Europe. I would guide other American students as they explored and aquatinted themselves with Denmark and Danish culture. After getting a taste of living in Denmark for three weeks, I now know that I need more. And the best way to get more is not only move there, but to also show other students just what I love about Denmark.

The opportunity this grant provided me contributed to my academic and personal life. I now have a clear direction that I want to take my senior thesis and I now have a clear direction that I want to take after I graduate. While most people I meet question the pragmatism of being a Scandinavian major, I ignore them. While I did so before I experienced Denmark, I can do so now with more conviction. I love what I do. I am pursuing my passion.