I can still clearly remember my day of Portuguese class at Ohio University. Frustrated by the words looked so much like the Spanish that I was comfortable with, yet pronounced so differently, I was certain that I was bound for failure. Less than a year later, I was learning to samba in a sun-filled living room in Southern Brazil, with a caipirinha in my hand, and freshly prepared feijoada on the table.

Participating in the study abroad program in Florianópolis (or Floripa, as it is lovingly referred to by locals and enamored American language students), Brazil, was one of the best experiences that I have had in my life. The program promised to fit a year of Portuguese into half of a summer. We studied at a university with Brazilian linguistics professors, and after the five weeks of intense instruction, I would say that these expected language learning goals were met. However, the best things that I got out of this program were the things that I learned that I did not expect to.

By living with a host family, I experienced a unique glance into everyday Brazilian family life and culture that I would have never seen had I traveled to Brazil on my own. My host mother treated me and the other two students in the house like her own daughters, and we still talk to this day. In the house I was able to use my Portuguese in a relaxed and natural way that I could not in the classroom. Although the language barrier still existed, (our host mother, Zenaide, does not know any English at all), we learned that some things, like laughter over a large meal with friends and family, need no translation.

The program directors and professors in Floripa were another part of my time in Brazil that I will never forget. Although our class schedule was rigorous, they made sure that we spent time learning outside of the classroom as well. We had many excursions around the state of Santa Catarina, of which Floripa is the capitol. We went white water rafting and enjoyed hot springs in the Serra Catarina mountain range that surrounds the city. We explored Blumenau, the former German-settled colony that holds the second-largest Oktoberfest in the world. We also went whale watching on the open ocean. On some sunny days, our culture professor would decide to move the class to the streets so that we could experience Floripa first-hand by going to an open-air artisan market, visiting a museum, or drinking caldo de cana (sugar cane juice) from a stand.

After the farewell dinner at a churrascaria, I said goodbye to Floripa and the good friends that I had made, but not to Brazil. Since the program ended at the end of July, I had the opportunity to travel to the magnificent Foz do Iguaçu, historic Salvador, glamorous Rio de Janeiro and finally Belo Horizonte, where I had the opportunity to visit my Brazilian friends, who were also OU students. Each city was so unique and different from the last, it was like traveling to five different countries. The five weeks that I spent traveling around the country and meeting people from all walks of life only further deepened my knowledge of and interest in Brazil.

By experiencing the language and everyday culture of Brazil, I can now put a face to the facts and numbers that I study every day in my coursework. Although what I learned cannot be charted, graphed or enumerated, as we often learn in graduate school that most important things should be, I believe that experiences such as this are the heart of what the Latin American Studies program is about.