Having the opportunity to travel to Nicaragua through the educational enrichment grant was an incredible and memorable experience. I have traveled a lot in the last decade, but I can honestly say that this trip taught me more than any other one I have gone on. It opened my eyes to fields (both the literal coffee ones and the academic one of economics) I had no prior knowledge of, and it helped me connect a lot of the dots within the history and politics I did already know.

Before departing on this trip, I set objectives for myself, three goals I hoped to dedicate myself to make the most of this experience. Those goals were: 1) to improve my critical thinking and questioning skills in a new field, 2) to learn how to work well and stay humble with other individuals and groups in a field of expertise and learning outside of my own, and 3) gain a more fundamental understanding of how food security and hunger issues are internationally interdependent, and how on the ground work and treatment of producers in one country can influence the overall accessibility to food in a different location.

Objectives one and two ended up merging into one overarching focus. This trip, focused on worker’s rights, fair trade, international development, and economics, was way outside my normal area of study, and frankly my comfort zone as well. I had to take time over the course of the trip to take a step back and remind myself to listen way more than speak, because I didn’t have the background in history and development that many of the other students did. Taking this step back, and talking with another friend on the trip, helped me learn a lot more about these fields. Taking this step back and listening also meant that I could gain a more comprehensive overview of the material, and then take my specific questions to other members of the group with past knowledge or experience. This in turn helped my ability to work with the other people in the
group. People generally enjoy talking about things they understand, and having me as a ready listener helped to make these strong and working relationships.

Journaling throughout this experience helped me to do this as well. Putting in the extra time every night to recall and reflect on what I learned helped me better understand what we learned and saw every day, and it gave me – an internal processor- space and time to think critically about what we saw and discovered. For example, the coffee cooperative we stayed with did not favor the fair-trade approach because it limited them, as a small and family oriented operation, through the stringent regulations and expensive paperwork. I had never heard anything against the fair-trade model before, and it is still something I am thinking about a lot, in terms of my impact as a consumer and how impactful labels, such as fair trade, can be for consumers versus producers.

My third goal, to learn more about food insecurity through international markets and an international lens, didn’t go where I initially expected it to. I expected to see what true food insecurity looks like in a poorer country and learn about what that existed. While I did get a little of that impact, I also got to learn about economic models and changed in thinking that we can use to help tackle food insecurity. One of the economists we talked to was focusing on food security within Nicaragua, and her lecture was incredible for me. I have since emailed her and she is sending me some of her past work in this area. It has made me realize that I cannot simply look at food security from a social justice perspective- it also needs other perspective, like economics- to fully understand and deal with the issue.

Academically, this trip opened my eyes to fields I had no prior experience with. It encouraged me to learn about these areas, and to stay curious about what I don’t know. Professionally, I learned about some future work I want to do with food security (through a
different lens of focus). It also helped me develop my Spanish skills much further and faster than I have before. I still have a long way to go, but I have realized how important having a second language is to me personally, and I plan to continue to pursue this lovely language. Personally, I learned about a new and different part of the world, and found myself falling in love with that part too. I discovered that not being good at something or having no background knowledge isn’t something that limits me. It makes me uncomfortable, yes, but it also motivates me to learn, discover, and become better.

Many of my reflections and experiences were published on the blog that I keep, http://lindseyparicio.blogspot.com. Blogging (and additional journaling) allowed me to record my experiences and learning, and share it with my family and friends. I hope to keep sharing my international education experience through conversations for a very long time to come, because I know that my experience is something that will not soon be forgotten. It helped be grow and challenge myself in ways different than I normally do, and I am so grateful for the opportunity provided by this grant program to discover a new place and new side of myself.