

Vira I. Heinz Program for Women
in Global Leadership



Letters
from Vira



The following pages contain letters from Vira I. Heinz Women In Global Leadership Awardees from the past 10 years. These letters were compiled at the Vira I. Heinz Women In Global Leadership 10 year reunion, and offer words of wisdom, guidance, and insight for incoming new Viras.

While you may or may not have met any of the authors of these letters, they are fiercely intelligent women who care so deeply about a multitude of things, but the number one is just how much their international experiences have shaped their lives.

Read these letters now, but also come back and reread as you go through your journey; they will mean different things to you as you grow and learn. Welcome to the incredibly unique, empowering, and life changing sisterhood that is the Vira. I Heinz Women In Global Leadership Program.

We are so happy to have you.



Dear Vira,

Welcome to the Sisterhood! I am so excited you've chosen to pursue this path for yourself. Even if the path that brought you to this very moment looks different than anyone else's, and even if your path from here on forward looks different than anyone else's, always remember that YOU BELONG! It was YOU who did the application work, and it was YOU who got selected, so that's already something to celebrate and stand tall in!

As a Vira myself now for a number of years, it's incredible to look back and think about the extent to which being a Vira has impacted my life. At the time I was awarded the scholarship, all my brain could think about and focus on was the travel abroad experience I was about to have. While my trip was exciting and definitely a highlight of my life, I had no idea that my overseas experience as a whole would give me a new level of confidence in myself.

It's the confidence gained from my overseas experience that has stood as a foundational point in my life I can always reference. If I could fly by myself, then I knew I had it in me to move a few states away from my parents after graduation. If I could teach a classroom of 40+ children, then I knew I could stand up to my bullying boss. If I could live in a different country, then I was certain I could do my own taxes, or whatever it may be! It's always been "If I could do that, then I can do this" - and the beautiful part is so can you! Think of the guts and courage you've already got in you to go after this goal and dream of yours, and channel that inside yourself whenever you're facing feelings of doubt, fear, or anxiety.

Please note that while I just mentioned flying, my work overseas, and the location of my travel experience, these are not the first things I think of when remembering my time abroad. Instead, I remember walking to work with my host brother as he told me stories about his new twin infants. I remember the foreign volunteer friends I made and that time we danced in the rain at our going away party. I remember the local friends I made and the evenings we'd spend on the rooftop talking. It's the people who make the experience memorable, so make the most of your time in the presence of others, talk to as many people as you can, and practice the native language beforehand (you won't regret it!) for a truly rich and authentic time.

Speaking of time, I'm looking forward to when I can meet you in person and learn all about you: why you applied for this program, where you traveled, what you did there, and how it impacted your life since returning. Reach out to Sarah Wagner or Pat Bristor for my contact info if you'd like to get a hold of me- I would be honored and blessed to be part of your incredible story.

Sincerely,

Hannah Szymanik
Waynesburg University
VIH Cohort 2012
Cape Coast, Ghana



Dear VIH Scholar,

First of all, a big CONGRATULATIONS on the immense honor of becoming a part of the Vira I. Heinz Program for Women in Global Leadership. This is an impressive accomplishment, one you should be very proud of.

My name is Emily and I studied abroad in Costa Rica and Cuba in 2016 as a part of the Carlow University cohort. If I had to give you any advice, it would be to NEVER doubt the incredible power you hold. You can, will, and have accomplish(ed) great things in your life, and this program will help guide you to create change locally, nationally, and globally. It may be intimidating at first to hear from all the other amazingly talented and accomplished women in your cohort, but please try to be encouraged and empowered instead of intimidated. Just remember, we all doubt ourselves, but you are HERE FOR A REASON!

Try to make the most of your time in the VIH program, meeting as many people as possible, and sharing your visions and goals with this network of Wonder Women. You will probably have a lot of questions about leaving the country for the first time, and the people in the VIH network are here to help.

Another piece of advice I have is this: if you are traveling to a country that does not speak English (or your first language), do as much as you can to learn before you leave for your trip. This may seem obvious, but I mistakenly assumed that the town I stayed at in Costa Rica would have more English speakers and was in for a shocking surprise when I found that the small coast town of Puntarenas, along with my host family, spoke almost no English. It made it challenging to communicate, thus limiting me in certain ways that I wouldn't have been if I knew the language more fluidly.

Live it up, learn as much as possible, see new things, then come home and transfer your wealth of knowledge into action to help change the world positively. I wish you all the luck, love, happiness, and growth.

-Emily E. Hayes



Hi there!

I want to let you know how very excited I am for you and your VIH study abroad experience! My study abroad trip to London nine years ago was life changing for me in so many ways and I want to share some pieces how I have been able to make the most of this experience over the last nine years.

Growing up in poverty it was difficult for me to grasp the possibility that I could one day participate in a study abroad experience. Actually, I was often crunched to pay for college and without VIH I certainly would not have been able to study abroad. In addition to this financial constraint, I had never been outside of the country before and was also nervous about leaving behind everything that felt comfortable and venturing into an unknown cultural immersion experience. Today, reflecting back on how much I have gained from VIH, I can say that this opened the door for many travels years later. I spent 2 years in Internal Audit at the company I work for traveling 50% of the time across the country. My VIH experience helped me grow from a shy, only child to an outgoing, confident business professional. I made connections and friendships at work that created the opportunity for me to get on a sail boat with a family of relative strangers and spend a week on a boat sailing the Caribbean Sea and then one year later joined the same group of now close friends to sail the Mediterranean. This past February my boyfriend and I took a trip to London (my first time back since my study abroad experience) and Paris. My return to London allowed me to understand how comfortable I now feel traveling and engaging with different cultures. Without VIH, I would never have had this experience. I also have made countless trips over the last nine years to Texas and Missouri to visit two of my best friends -- friendships I made during my 6-week VIH experience in London.

In summary, VIH gave me a journey across the world, but so much more than that. The program opened my eyes to cultural differences and also helped me learn more about myself and what I was capable of -- and the value of human interaction. I encourage you to make the most of your experience, but more than anything, share you experience with others. Make common connections based off of how you felt when first venturing to a new country. Share anxious moments, exciting moments, and the moments that leave you in awe that such experiences are possible. Embrace your experience and allow it to make a difference for you that you can share to make a difference for others.

Keep traveling, keep growing!

Gina
2010 VIH Cohort



Dear Vira,

Let me first start but saying how excited I am for you to embark on this journey ahead. You have so many incredible moments headed your way in the steps ahead of this travel experience.

Over the years, Sarah has said many impressionable things that have stayed with me over the course of my life journey. One of the biggest being the notion of keeping in mind that this abroad experience does not (and shouldn't necessarily be) framed as being life changing. Her reason for saying this and something that I learned along the way is that this sentiment is quite a high bar to reach and pressure to put on self. But rather think about the ways that it can transform your world and self. How it deepens your lens, shifts your perspective, and allows you to dive deep into the parts of yourself you have yet to explore. You are going to learn so much and who is to say how it continues to impact the rest of your career, life, relationships, and self.

I hope that you remember to breathe, step into your power, and relax your mind in all the ways you can along the way. Journal your way through this experience. Taking this intimate time with your journal, pen, and your mind will serve you to greater lengths than you may ever imagine. You'll really appreciate looking back at this later down the road as well.

One of the most incredible things about you, and I am very confident in this, is how brave you are. You are taking a great, vast, step into the unknown and moving in that space of possibility for yourself. This moment of bravery is something you can hold onto for the rest of your life and let it continue to shape your movements in this lifetime.

You are stepping into a huge network of support, love, and powerful women who have gone through a similar journey as you have which will be one of the best support circles and communities you could ever imagine. We can't wait to meet you and continuing cheering you on as you move forward.

All the love & light,
Brittany



Dear Vira,

I hope this letter finds you embarking on or returning from a life-changing international experience. I know when I went abroad it most definitely was for me. Moving towards your CEE with your fellow cohorts, I know that this opportunity is something you were more than built for to be able to impact the community and those who personally know you. I trust you will do an amazing job and most of all enjoy it. The last thing I want to tell you is the Vira family is like no other. It feels like a space where you can just be. They are people in your corner when you sometimes feel there are none there. You may not see them, but they are present. If you ever feel lost at any point in your journey in your career, life, and who you are becoming believe me when I say many if not all of us have been there. There are moments when we can become as unsure as we are sure. Things may fall apart, and things may also beautifully come together. All in all, no matter what happens you are beautiful, strong, inspiring, powerful, and a world-shaker and changer. You are a part of those people that make the world brighter, more just, and more real. I am looking forward to meeting you one day if we ever get that chance. I'm wishing you the best.

With all love,

Tamara '15 Cohort



Dear new Vira,

First, a big thank you! I am so happy you decided to start this journey abroad!

I want to let you know that what you are stepping into is not only a cohort but a community that will be one of the most supportive groups you will ever encounter in your life. Remember that YOU deserve to be here, and that you are going to do so many great things abroad. I encourage you to take chances, be open to trying new things and meeting new people. When you are open minded, you gain so much more than just memories; you gain wisdom and love. A love for those who are different from you but yet the same.

Take advantage of every opportunity you are given, but also create those opportunities for yourself too while you are abroad and just in every aspect of your life.

I encourage you to take the time to be present with those around you and be intentional; try to learn new things and communicate with those around you. Plan on building relationships both while abroad and at the retreat because those you encounter can affect what you make of your experience.

Lastly, remember to inhale and exhale, taking in the beauty around you!

"It is in all of us to defy expectations, to go into the world and to be brave, and to want, to need, to hunger for adventures. To embrace the chance and risk so that we may breathe and know what it is to be free."

Mae Chevrette

Love,

Moesha Godwin

2016 Cohort- Australia Study Abroad



Dear new VIH Awardee,

Congratulations! You have become part of a very prestigious foundation that only accepts the crème de la crème of young women. You should be very proud of this accomplishment. Take a moment to fully take in and realize the level of talent and potential the Vira I. Heinz Foundation board members see in you. Now, use that to fuel you in your confidence and drive to learn as you embark in your adventure abroad!

If you are feeling a little anxious for all the planning and preparation you need to accomplish before studying abroad, do not worry, you are not alone. I feel confident in saying all the past VIH awardees have felt overwhelmed, nervous, trepidatious, and a little scared before embarking on their adventure. Embrace all these emotions. I actually suggest that you take a mental note and remember exactly how you are feeling right now during the planning stages of your VIH experience. This way you will remember how fearful of the unknown you were after you have completed your travels. When we can see how far we have come that is when we truly grow as human-beings. Run head-on into your fears and worries. The past VIH awardees that I have seen have the most success during their study abroad and make the most memorable experiences are those who did not ignore their fears but instead used those fears to propel them. They pushed themselves to learn more about their travel's country, culture, people, and language. Not only will pushing past your worries help you learn more about the place you are traveling to, but it will lead to tremendous personal growth you cannot gain through any other experience.

Please embrace fear of the unknown and savor every little moment of personal growth and learning. No mistake is a failure, it is a learning experience. When I look back at my experience, I do not remember how well I spoke Gaelic or how on-point my dialect was. I remember the chances I took to experience everything Ireland had to offer. I remember how I tried to truly savor every interaction I had and every magnificent scene I saw. I got so caught up in the beauty of the Cliffs of Moher I had to run to make the bus ride back as it was pulling away to return to the complete opposite side of the country. I will never forget how I was not even fazed that I was almost left abandoned with nowhere to stay, hours away from my university in a foreign country. I was simply enamored that I got to see such a glorious sight. These are the seconds and minutes that will turn into lifelong memories.

I can truly say that my VIH study abroad experience turned my worries into challenges that I learned to love to overcome. It turned my weaknesses into my strengths. Before my trip I was bad with directions, was admittedly OCD about having a plan/ itinerary, had little experience with public transportation, and was skeptical of traveling alone. After my trip, I would literally look for ways to end up in a place I did not know to just go and explore it by myself without any plan. That's the confidence in yourself and sense of curiosity about the world around you which the VIH Program fosters and brings out of you.

Take every opportunity you can to explore your surroundings and to see life in a different way. No experience is invaluable even if it does not go as planned, every moment shapes who we are and who we become.

Sincerely,

Tara O'Toole, W&J College

Cohort 2017, Ireland



Dear Viras

As you enter this program, and walk into the first spring retreat, you are probably excited, but nervous, maybe overwhelmed. Here is what I wish someone would I told me before that first retreat.

This program is truly life-changing. You will probably hear that phrase a lot throughout your journey through the program, but it is hard to describe until after you are completed with the program. From that first opening session at the retreat- pay attention. And I don't mean pay attention as in there will be a test later. I mean pay attention to the speakers, the presentations, your fellow cohort. You will learn new ideas, new things about people that you may have never heard before. Be open to new things. Step outside your comfort zone. And make it a point to try to meet as many people as you can.

The next piece of advice I have for you- take the goals and actions plan session seriously! These goals and action plans may sound intimidating or daunting, but I promise you if you truly focus on these goals and actions plans, it will make your study abroad experience much more than just travelling to a different country.

Be present at the retreat, be open, but most importantly be true to yourself. Every single one of you deserves to be here. Be yourself.

When you go on your study abroad experience, the same thing applies. Be yourself. Many of you will find out that who you thought you were is not that same as who you are when you return from your abroad experience. Challenge yourself to try something different abroad, try new foods, interact with new people, do an activity that you have never done before.

Above all, remember that you have an amazing network of past and present Vira's to lean on for support, advice, comfort and guidance. Don't be afraid to reach out.

Love,

Vira



Dear future Vira,

Take a deep breath. This is going to be difficult, but you've done difficult things before. You took the leap to apply and interview for the VIH Program. You earned your way here. You are deserving of this.

Do not be intimidated by the accomplishments of others. You are not here to compare yourself to the other amazing people in the room. You are one of them. Only compare yourself today with the person you were yesterday. Check in with yourself often to be sure you are not in a cycle of compare and criticize.

As you gain knowledge and experiences, stay humble. We Viras are continuous learners. There's not a threshold of knowledge that we aspire to reach.

Stay curious. Keep an open mind. Make true connections with others.

Through this program and your international experience, you will challenge yourself in ways you never imagined possible, but you are never alone. Your cohort and the years of Viras who came before you are here.

Always remember, take a deep breath.

You've got this.

Bethany (Hallam) Reynolds

2013 VIH alumna, Paris, France

2015-2017 VIH Intern



Dear Vira,

Welcome to the VIH Family! You will quickly learn that this is not just a study abroad experience or merely a leadership program, but a sisterhood full of amazing and inspiring women, who share a love for travel and change.

I would like to congratulate you on this life changing opportunity, and I hope that you make the most of every minute of it!

Additionally, I hope that you take this opportunity to discover, not only a new culture and country, but also, more about yourself. Step out of your comfort zone and challenge yourself to see new perspectives!

I have had many great mentors over the years, with a lot of great advice, but one particular quote has profoundly changed my life:

“There are two types of regret...Regret for the things that you’ve done; but also, regret for the things that you didn’t do.” – The Honorable Farley Toothman

As your journey continues, remember, you are the author of your life; so, dream big, choose wisely, and embrace failure. Only then will you be able to fully appreciate what it means to be a life-long learner.

Sincerely,

Kara Compton
Waynesburg University
2019 Cohort



Dear Vira:

Congratulations on becoming a Vira, I am so excited for you!

You are about to embark on an experience that will forever change your life. I am a member of the 2008 cohort and, more than ten years later, still view my life in terms of “before” and “after” my VIH experience. Before VIH I had never been out of the country. After VIH I felt I could do anything because I had proven to myself that I could survive abroad for a month. There is no substitute for 4+ weeks learning abroad when you are an undergraduate woman deciding how to make your mark on the world.

You are joining a community of inspiring, problem-solving women by becoming a Vira. Your fellow Viras will both uplift you and challenge you. You probably already know this, but it is really rare to find a group that supports you in this way. You might be questioning whether or not you can do this (I know I did back in 2008) but know that you would not have been chosen for this experience if you couldn't do it. You *can* do it! Your VIH experience will challenge you to access your inner strength using skills you didn't know you had - and no one will ever be able to take the resulting empowerment away from you.

During your VIH study abroad experience, I would like to challenge you to practice awareness. Your life perspective is going to change drastically before, during, and after your trip as you prepare, participate in, and re-enter your daily life after you are abroad. Write down your expectations, thoughts, and experiences daily in a journal so you have a record of your personal transformation that you can go back to and revisit. (Start today, don't wait until you're abroad because your transformation begins when find out you were selected by the VIH program.) This journal will be your most precious souvenir and you will probably have it for many years to come. It will remind you to keep a growth mindset now and will remind you of what a brave, amazing woman you are in the future when you are encountering one of life's storms.

You've got this! Congratulations on your decision to experience the world!

Your fellow Vira,

Lana Greenawald, 2008 cohort
Courchevel, France/Harp performance
greenawaldL@gmail.com



Dear Viras,

First, I'd like to congratulate you on this amazing opportunity. You've not only earned the right to be in this space but you're taking charge in your life and fulfilling a destiny. Through this experience you'll gain a sisterhood, become an international traveler and inspire many along the way. You've been afforded an opportunity that very few are fortunate to have. Do me a favor and have the time of your life! Don't be wary (your family and friends will do that for you). Take the time needed to prepare for your experience but when you arrive, stop, inhale then exhale and as you take your first steps remember to be patient with yourself. It may take some time to adjust to the culture and ways of the people but luckily the VIH program will more than prepare you for those exchanges. You'll develop a bond with the ladies of your cohort and the ones who came before you. Throughout your journey if you ever begin to question the path you've taken don't hesitate to reach out to one of your sisters to gain inspiration.

Best wishes and safe travels!

Akire Hoots/ Thailand

University of Pittsburgh at Bradford, Cohort 2017



Dear Vira,

Hi, first of all, how are you? Take a moment to just understand what you're feeling right now and be in this moment. This program and the connections you make will last a life-time, but the things you feel right now? Really soak them in. Once you return from your travels you will be an entirely different person and you'll want to look back on who you were. I want to give you three main pieces of advice encompassing **travel, life and joy**.

Firstly, for travel – reach out to the people you meet. While I studied in South Korea in 2017 I became fast friends with other students I studied with. These connections have lasted through to 2019 and I foresee myself travelling to see my friends (they are from Australia) in the next two years. Don't let the people you meet be fleeting moments... at least not all of them! Let your travels follow you and let your connections become global in this endeavor.

Secondly, for life- make a playlist of music that makes you happy and listen to it often. Get comfortable living in the moment. You'll do that often while traveling abroad, and it will make you super happy. Bring that home. Don't compartmentalize your happiness. Life is too short!

Third, for joy- for the sake of joy, take many pictures, eat the fun food and write down your favorite quotes. When I was in South Korea I took so many pictures that I have wrote little notes for. I took free coasters, and I anchored myself in moments. I did this by closing my eyes counting to ten and opening them back up. I would take in the warmth, the weather etc. I used to hate humid weather before my travels, and now it's a point of joy for me. Find your joy abroad and use those skills at home. Be vivacious. Not for the sake of anyone else but yourself.

Your travels abroad are temporary, the moments will feel fleeting and you may not be able to travel abroad again for many years. Don't let the temporary nature of such an experience hold you back and don't let your lack of experience hold you back either.

Remember that you can do this, even if it scares you, and especially if it does.

I want to leave you with this quote my favorite high-school teacher shared with me that I repeat often when I feel unworthy, uncomfortable, when I'm suffering from imposter syndrome etc.

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” – Eleanor Roosevelt

So excited to welcome you all into this wonderful collection of inspiring people,

Crystal M. Durachko



Dear fellow VIH recipient,

Let me begin by offering you my sincerest congratulations. Receiving the Vira I. Heinz Scholarship for Women in Global Leadership is an incredible honor, and I am positive that you are so, so deserving of it!

To say that participating in the VIH Program was life-changing sounds cliché, but it is absolutely true. I have made lasting friendships and professional connections with members of my VIH cohort, as well as with other recipients before and after my time. I learned so much from my VIH study abroad experience in Paris—and other international experiences since—about living in different walks of life and promoting harmony and understanding between people who share little common ground. Finally, I have learned how to be a confident and capable leader, which is something I never thought possible for a quiet and shy person like me before VIH opened my eyes to the fact that leaders can take many forms.

I hope that your life, too, will be changed for the better through this program—and I am confident that it will be! My biggest piece of advice for you is to reflect throughout this experience. The leadership retreats are a whirlwind of fun and fascinating activities, and you will be so busy soaking up life abroad. Please spend a few minutes every day—first thing in the morning, at lunch, right before bed, whatever works for you—thinking or writing about where you are physically, mentally, and emotionally, as well as where you have been and where you want to be in the future. I know that my time in the program flew by, and this technique helped me to make the most of it. I hope it can do the same for you.

I wish you all the best in this and your future endeavors, and I hope that we meet in person someday soon!

Yours truly,
Ivy Kuhrman
VIH Program, 2014
Chatham University, B.A., 2016
Simmons University, MLIS, 2018



Dear Vira,

I'm writing you from the Vira I. Heinz Program for Women in Global Leadership's 10-year reunion, so excited to be surrounded by ten years' worth of other Viras—women who have travelled the world and convened in Pittsburgh once again in a flurry of warmth, success, and support for each other. These women embody both aspects of the original Vira's legacy: her love of travel and her support of other women.

You're about to join this jet setting group. Soon your cohort, mentors, and the incredible people planning the VIH program will be equipping you with everything you need to know to study abroad with as much generosity as Vira exhibited when she first began sending women to travel Europe

For me, studying abroad felt like a dream that I wouldn't get to see. I am a first-generation college student, and no one in my family had been abroad before either. Through the help of my campus coordinator and the VIH program, I spent a summer in Iceland chasing my passions. While it seemed that VIH had opened up this one opportunity, it turned out that hundreds of opportunities followed: the friends I made at the retreats, the things I learned about being a woman, a leader, and a global citizen, the language I learned abroad, the host family who took me in, the amazing sights I saw, and the experience of sharing it all with my community back home.

And then, VIH kept giving. I decided to apply to graduate school. This was another first in my family that felt insurmountable once I dug my heels into researching and applying to programs. I felt like I didn't know what I was doing and would never be able to figure it out without a roadmap. But VIH taught me to persist, adapt, and ask for help. I learned to actively seek out the guidance I needed to get where I was supposed to be, which turned out to be a PhD program in Virginia. Even after getting in, I was so nervous to move away from southwest Pennsylvania, to jump into a new field, and to attempt such a lofty goal.

It was one of my professors who pointed out to me that “Hey, you've already lived by yourself in another country. Moving two states away is going to be easy in comparison.”

I wouldn't say it was easy. In fact, the past year of my life has been the most difficult I've ever experienced, with the transition to graduate school bringing a new environment, new town, new apartment, new classes, and new expectations in a dizzying storm. But I was more ready to handle it than I've ever been. I had the support network and the skills from VIH to get me through, and here I am, finishing my first year of research and classes at Virginia Tech.

And you know what? I have never been surrounded by so many men before in my life. I hope that more women join STEM and I think VIH gave me the push I needed to dedicate myself here to uplifting the women I meet the same way I was uplifted in Pittsburgh. Other women are our allies, never our competition. We challenge each



other to be better, but celebrate each other's victories too. You'll meet plenty of people—men, women, and all other folks—who disagree with you, who argue with you, who say things that make your skin crawl. Be open minded, and hold the people around you to the same high standards that you hold yourself to. Be firm and straightforward. Center marginalized voices, always consider the perspectives of people who don't look or live like you, and let everyone know that you stand for other women.

These and everything else you learn at VIH require practice. We're never done learning or flexing our feminism, former Viras included. But we can make self-reflection a habit as natural as breathing.

If I could tell my younger self anything before my first VIH retreat, it would be this: it's okay to be nervous, but remember that the nervousness you feel is really excitement. You are just as smart and worldly and cool and deserving and probably as intimidating as the women you are about to meet. You'll never be the same again, but that doesn't mean you can't always come home to Pittsburgh and the VIH program.

Words can't describe how excited I am for you to embark on this expedition. You'll soon see that once you begin to travel, you'll never finish; maybe we'll meet each other in Japan or Morocco or Antarctica someday. Until then, please feel free to reach out to me, whether you need guidance through travelling or applying to graduate school, or just want to chat with someone who's cheering you on from afar.

Sincerely,
Kaitlyn Shirey
kaitlynshirey@yahoo.com



Dear Vira,

First of all, congratulations for receiving the golden ticket to your first international experience. Welcome to the family – we're all so excited to have you!

My name is Brooke – I was a part of the 2017 cohort, and I studied in the Czech Republic. I spent a month in Prague studying alternative culture and how political change is not only reflected in, but predicted by art and music. I'm a violist, teaching and freelancing in Philadelphia, but I plan to pursue a PhD in ethnomusicology studying politics and music.

My path from Prague to PhD may sound planned out; it fits beautifully, right? I have this international experience studying politics and music, and I end up pursuing academic research in the same field years later. Totally planned, right?

Not at all planned.

Many of you will have a clear path from your international experience to your future goals, and the goals and action plans you write and accomplish will all follow a clear route to whatever your ultimate goal is. You have an internship at an accounting firm abroad and you go on to earn your CPA; you study a language and cultural education and you go on to apply that experience in your own classroom. I applaud you if at your age you have that clear of a path – I certainly did not.

This letter is for the Viras that may not know what they are doing yet. The Viras who have this international experience and go on to do something completely different. The Viras who change their mind about what they want to do with their lives.

I'm here to tell you that it's all okay.

Your journey will not end with the end of your international experience; it will not end at the completion of your CEE. The VIH program will be the beginning of many things to come.

For me, that did not become clear until I graduated college, and finished the first year of a Master of Music program in Viola Performance, which I was not completely sure about applying to in the first place. I chose a path of music performance and put ideas of leadership in politics or academia aside for years. It was not until a professor encouraged me to consider a PhD based on our interactions in a graduate seminar class that I began to see the impact this program left on me. My professor asked me to consider what I had always been interested in studying; I thought back to my high school experiences, political leadership programs and music...and I thought back to my summer in Prague.



It all became clear to me that even though I had written off my studies in Prague as a one-time summer experience, the seed had been planted. When I returned to the VIH reunion in June later that year we learned to dance Cumbia and Salsa...Salsa is Cuban; my partner plays Cuban music regularly and his performances had become something near and dear to my heart. That singular dance lesson was enough spark for me to realize I can study politics and music that I love in a language I can already read. I might have eventually made this connection on my own, but perhaps not for many years to come. I quite literally danced my way into the next step in my life at a time when I had never felt more unsure.

I walked into the VIH program feeling undeserving and unqualified – the imposter syndrome ran wild when I was surrounded by intelligent, powerful women my age or younger, all accomplishing incredibly impressive things while I struggled with mental health issues, relationships, and finishing a degree. I walked out feeling empowered, and surer in my path to graduate school. When I later lost my way in my master's program, my return to VIH inspired me to follow a new path that has never felt more right.

Every person's journey is different. To compare your life accomplishments directly to another's will either depress and demotivate you, or it will motivate you to succeed out of spite. In a world governed by spite and envy, I urge you to focus on yourself. You were admitted to this program for a reason – consider what that reason may be and consider what you have to offer, not only to the VIH program but also to the world around you.

You have so much ahead of you – I wish you the best of luck.

Much love,

Brooke



Dear Vira,

I bet you are feeling both honored and HYPE about your new and exciting journey. My name is Trina Van. I was part of the 2016 Cohort and now I'm writing this letter 3 years after my international experience. I grew up with parents who arrived in the U.S. as war refugees from Vietnam. Traveling out of this country that brought them to safety was not something they encouraged. Nevertheless, I took my trip to Mérida, México and La Havana, Cuba ready to experience different cultures and learn a new language. I didn't realize how overcome I would be with homesickness, and I was overwhelmed because I felt I couldn't express myself properly. Fortunately, during the Spring Retreat, I created a VIH GroupMe and having my cohort brought me a lot of comfort during my journey. Feelings of fear -- fear of change, fear of loneliness, fear of uncertainty -- are completely normal. I can tell you now that there are hundreds of Viras who have made those scary steps before you. Reach out to them to help ground yourself. I have included my contact information in this letter and welcome any questions you may have.

I have a friend who said she was excited to start a new project but was very nervous that she would screw it up. Those feelings resonated with me as I am starting medical school this August. In her reflection, my friend decided that her nervousness was simply a sign that she cared. She very elegantly redirected the feelings that she was experiencing and transformed them to positive thoughts. Dr. Sasha Heinz spoke with us at the VIH 10-Year Reunion and talked a lot about cognitive-behavioral coaching. When we embrace the choices we make and associate them with empowering thoughts, we can stride boldly into anything. I am not nervous to "screw things up" in medical school. We learn so much when things don't go exactly as planned. I hope you feel confident getting on that plane and embracing all the choices you make along the way. This is your path to global citizenship. I am excited to hear what you make out of your moments abroad, and I sincerely hope you get a chance to return many years from now.

In short: you are a strong, independent woman. You have earned your spot here. You have entered a community ready to support you in all your future endeavors. When the next reunion comes around, I hope to see you there. I hope to learn from your experiences and feel your light. Now go and have a safe flight!

Trina Van

Vira I. Heinz Program '16
Temple University '18



Dear Vira,

Congratulations, first and foremost. If you are having any doubts or fears or second thoughts about this experience, let me start by dispelling all of those negative thoughts quickly. You were chosen because you DESERVE to be here. If you are not having those feelings, but rather are nervous and anxious, GOOD. That tells us it means something to you, greater than you even feel right now. You are about to embark on the most life-changing journey you could imagine. Not to say that this experience won't spark future traveling that will also be life-changing, but this is your very FIRST international trip. You are at such a crucial age where you are being molded into a person that such a cultural adventure as this will shape you to feel more empowered than anything else ever will. The inspiration that I will leave you with is this: live in the moment. You are venturing into a foreign country where you have no experience in, so you can only be as prepared as what others are willing to share with you. Don't over-plan and keep your mind open to new ideas. I envisioned so many scenarios of how my experience would turn out when I traveled to Wellington, New Zealand, but I don't think I ever could have imagined how it actually went and the person it built me to be today. With that, I wish you happy and safe travels!

Joslyne Cook

2012 Cohort

Thiel College 2014

New Zealand



Dear Vira,

First, let me start off by saying CONGRATULATIONS! You have been awarded a prestigious scholarship based off your own accomplishments and because you are seen as an implementation of social change and will learn how to be a global citizen. You. Have. Earned. This. Never forget that.

I know when I was an awardee in 2015, I felt overwhelmed with excitement as well as anxiety about my first trip abroad. Fortunately, I was not alone in this, and neither are you. While the retreats are intimidating and jam packed with information, they will give you everything you need to have a successful and transformative trip abroad. And if you feel as if you're missing something or not fully understanding, do NOT be afraid to ask questions and reach out for support.

I may not personally know you, but I cannot contain my excitement for this journey you will be embarking on. This is so much more than a physical destination journey, it's a transformation of the self. You will be challenged and given opportunities to think critically. You will be given a new cultural perspective in which to view the world and life situations.

I want to give you some words to reflect on. As hard as it is to shut off the worries of the past, present, and future, do everything in your power to truly revel in the moment. Be as present as possible and soak in every moment. No matter what the inner critic in your head may tell you, you are deserving and worthy of wonderful and awe-inspiring opportunities. Imposter syndrome is a nasty little monster that will attempt to convince you that you don't belong in the spaces you prayed about being in, and I'm here to tell you that everything it has to say is a bold-faced lie.

You are here, right now, because of your merits and who you are as an individual. You are now a part of something so much bigger than yourself. You are a Vira, and the opportunities are endless now that you are one of us. You are now a part of one of the greatest support networks I have ever come to know. I hope that your experiences inspire you towards reciprocity—the component that keeps VIH running and makes this network what it is. Now that you are a recipient, and once you come back from your international experience, you will be welcomed with open arms to share not only your story, but also the stories of the places you visited and the individuals you met. Come back to the future retreats and inspire the Viras to come, I promise you won't regret it.

Should you feel called to connect, my name is Ivey and you can reach me through my email: ivshorts@gmail.com. Stay curious and brave.



Dear Vira Awardees,

By now, you're probably either sick of how excited everyone is for you because you get to go abroad and embark on this wonderful journey, or you are annoyed of everyone being so nervous and concerned for you.

At the retreat, all of the Viras are thrilled for you. The experience of going abroad is such a life changing experience. It opens your eyes to different cultures and experiences. It leaves you open to change and curious to keep learning more now that you've had a taste (again, you have probably heard this countless times by now). I knew if I could pull everything together to go abroad, these things would all be true, but I was so worried that come the time to leave for my trip, I would not have everything done and I would not be able to go. I remember almost every week, I would ask my mentor about all these deadlines I had to meet and things I had to have done (ie. applying to the program, looking into visas, scheduling your flights, navigating airports, learning the language...). My mentor was so relaxed and told me not to worry. I couldn't believe she was telling me this! These things were what was standing between me and the experience that could change my life. She was right though. I was so worried about all of these small details going into the first retreat and the end of spring semester, and because of that I missed out on what I could have gained during the time.

On the note of the first retreat, I was beyond nervous going into it. It is a group of women who all have so much potential and drive. These are women who have the power to change the world one day. Knowing the capabilities and the women that the Vira program accepts, I felt very intimidated before going to the first retreat. You are just as powerful though! Don't forget you were chosen for this program too. As you stay active in the Vira program and attend the fall retreat and any future retreats and reunions, you will see that these women are some of the best women that you will ever meet. Whenever I talk to a fellow Vira, there is almost an instant bond. We are both open minded and genuine people. It is refreshing to talk to other people who will help build you up instead of tearing you down.

Another quick note about retreats, if a lecturer is interesting to you and you want to learn more, don't be afraid to approach them and ask them anything! I had in my head that they were all so busy and above us, but they truly are here for you. They love talking about what they do and where you are going. They love helping you. They truly are here to help and they love talking to all of you and answering questions and being of service however they can! And on that note, most previous Viras are here for you as well! We are great resources to reach out to, whether it be about studying abroad, job opportunities, or life decisions. The Vira cohorts are such an incredible network. I kept hearing that from previous Viras, and I was skeptical. But trust me, the more retreats you attend, the more you put yourself out there and network with them at different events, you too will see how wonderful this network truly is.

Welcome to the experience that will change your life if you work for it. I look forward to meeting you all in future events!

All the best,
Moriah Judy

2016 Cohort. University of Pittsburgh. BS in Neuroscience. Moriahmae27@gmail.co



Dear Vira,

This sisterhood is such an amazing opportunity that is not just impactful now but also in the future. You are part of the cohort as a whole and not just this year. There are so many women doing amazing things in their fields on a day to day basis. Do not be afraid to reach out to anyone, because they were once in your shoes on their first retreats and boarding a plane excited and nervous for their journey as well. If there's anyone that will understand, it's your fellow Viras, whether it's about personal or professional issues or questions. I hope you realize and appreciate the network open to you and also perhaps give what you can back to the program.

For me, I was so shy I barely connected to people my first retreat while others were so much more open and talkative. The program, through retreats and travel, made me realize my quiet demeanor is not necessarily bad it just meant I connected to people better one on one instead of in large groups. This small insight allowed me to be much more open for the second retreat and 10 Year Reunion we had, which I got to be part of the committee for as well. I simultaneously helped the program and also got to meet fellow Viras.

This scholarship expects a lot of commitment from you, but anyone who is a Vira women is there because they always go above and beyond. Use this scholarship as a foundation for what you will do, do not let it be the end. Yes, this scholarship is an honor, but since you are a fellow Vira I am sure there is much more you will accomplish. Even if you're stagnant in life for a while, there is no need to feel like you're behind. Everyone is doing their best at their own pace. I wish you all the best!

Vira



Manao ahoana Vira,

What you're about to experience is twofold: the VIH sisterhood & the big, wide "Abroad." I will impart some advice on how to make the most of each, starting with VIH since that is what you'll experience first (you'll be thankful for that).

I don't know about you, but my friends always told me to pipe down when I "got on my soap box." But at the VIH retreats, I was surrounded by women who thought and felt in the same ways I do. (Important to note: I don't mean they thought and felt the exact same as me, just in the same way or process.) It's going to feel empowering to be in a fishbowl full of like-minded women. I felt like everyone I met was cooler than me and that's a good, humbling thing. Be sure to talk to Viras that are from outside your institution or that don't look like you. Stay in touch for valuable contacts/networks, information, and inspiration. You are lucky to be a part of this sisterhood.

Now for "Abroad" ... a much larger fishbowl. Bring ideas and materials you got from VIH with you. I leaned on those lessons and turned them over in my head during alone time. They maximized my curiosity and openness. Journal- it's another way to embed memories and you'll certainly want that in the future. When people ask me about my time abroad now, almost 5 years later, I find myself scrambling for meaningful buzz words in hopes of convincing them (and sometimes myself) that it was all that it was. If I had the chance to read my journal first I'd be reaffirmed in the worth of my experiences. Five years later you may not remember the names of the courses, your instructor's go-to phrase, or that inside joke that was drug along for the entirety of the trip. It is then that you'll want your written entries, the documentation that this amazing experience happened to you. This experience that you made happen because you earned the VIH scholarship. While Abroad, really give the language, dance, cooking, garb a go. If you shrink away because you'll possibly make a fool of yourself you'll look back and regret not diving in. Dive into everything. Be a yes-woman. Be a VIH woman.

Veloma,

Kaitlin Fagan (Madagascar, 2015)



Dear Future Vira,

First off, I would just like to congratulate you on being accepted into an amazing program and adventure. Your skills and accomplishments were seen by the Vira I. Heinz Program as assets that made you stand out as an applicant. You have something special to bring to the program, and I hope you take this wonderful opportunity to showcase what you have to offer to the world. Take these next couple of months to reflect on who you are, what you stand for, and what you hope to achieve in the coming years.

Your first retreat will make you challenge your beliefs and allow you to adapt as a future global leader. You'll meet so many amazing women who you'll have the opportunity to connect with and learn from. The activities you will experience during the weekend will push you to think more about your own future study abroad experience, your FIRST abroad experience. The idea of it all might seem daunting at first. I promise you that after this retreat, you'll have some sort of new perspective on your endeavor. It might be a positive perspective or it might be a new scary one. Either way, you now have a group of women to turn to, prior to leaving, to share your thoughts or concerns. You're not alone! I, personally, became closer with the Viras at my university after the first retreat. After the second retreat, I became closer with so many other women in the program. Do not feel that you need to make immediate close connections at first. The second retreat will help you do that on its own. But, if you can make at least one connection with someone at your first retreat, go for it! Don't be afraid to open up and showcase your personality. Everyone you will meet has a purpose in this program. Don't forget about yours.

I hope you have an amazing study abroad experience. You'll learn the tools at the retreat that will help you navigate your summer. Use these tools! Share these tools with others you study abroad with. Be mindful of your experience. This is a time to not only learn what your individual program will offer, but also to learn more about yourself as a woman and as a human being.

Make the most out of your time in this program and abroad. I promise you good things will come from it.

From,
A Vira.



Dear Vira,

You are about to embark on such an exciting new journey! My advice to you is to try and remember the big picture. Your experience with the Vira Heinz program is so much more than a fun trip abroad or college credits. This program is about empowering women. Think of how many women throughout history could never even dream of traveling! Think of the women in other countries (maybe even the one that you are visiting) who may still not be able to dream of traveling or maybe of getting a college (or any) education. The Vira Heinz program spoils us in a lot of ways but we truly are a privileged group of women. Keep this in mind as you meet women abroad, as you meet the other women in your cohort, as you reflect on your trip and plan your CEE, but most importantly: remember this as you finish your degree, as you plan your career, and as you decide whether or how to give back in your community, etc. You have the power to make a difference in this world just as Vira I. Heinz made, and continues to make, a difference in the lives of so many women. Dream big, think outside of the box, don't limit yourself, and be unapologetically you. Lastly, I encourage you to keep in contact with the other women in your cohort. It is so rare that we get to be surrounded by intelligent and globally minded women and you can continue to inspire one another. Together, Vira women are truly a force to be reckoned with!

Sincerely,

A former Vira



Dear Vira,

First, I want you to know that this is a HUGE accomplishment and, most importantly, you are meant to be here. You have more than earned this, and on behalf of all the Viras before you: welcome.

You are about to embark on a very unique journey – one in which you will learn more about yourself and the world around you. You will impress and surprise yourself in ways that you never thought you could. Therefore, I encourage you to be brave and open-minded. Be open to learning about how the people of your international experience view Americans, be open to learning the language in and *outside* of the classroom, be open to making friends with the locals and reading the local news, be open to being immersed in the culture – and **appreciate not appropriate**. Be aware of your actions and thoughts about the community – just because their way of life may be different, it doesn't make it wrong: I promise you they are not looking at you to save them. I'm sure you already know this, but be weary of how you portray the country and the people on social media, make sure your point isn't missed. Make sure that you spend some time alone as well, really digest the world around you and check in with yourself. Document EVERYTHING, you will want to see it later. And don't forget: be present. What's going on in the United States will be there when you get back – you're not missing out on **anything**.

Finally, remember that as a Vira you are intelligent, daring, brilliant, and above all: brave. Never let the world or the opinions of others get you down. Never believe "them" when they tell you that you are anything other than what you are. Control your thoughts, as you become them over time. Your thoughts become your feelings, then your actions, and then your results. Your thoughts become your destiny, so make it a good one (:

We're Rooting for You,
Vira



Dear Vira,

Congratulations on this prestigious accomplishment of being awarded the Vira I. Heinz Scholarship! I'm sure there are a lot of thoughts going through your mind right now. Maybe you are reflecting on the busy and insightful weekend you just had at the spring retreat. Maybe you are thinking of the upcoming journey you will embark on in the next few months. Maybe you feel nervous about the uncertainty that comes along with leaving the country for the first time. Maybe you are stressed about other schoolwork you need to do when you get back to your campus. Whatever it is, it is completely normal; I remember feeling the same way. I promise you are going to be okay, and you will accomplish more than you could ever imagine. Before the VIH, I felt stuck on a small college campus and unaware of events going on in the world. This changed my outlook on the world and made me realize the impact I can have. When I met up with my cohort at the fall retreat, I saw that many of the others felt the same way.

Step outside of your normal comfort zone while abroad. I chose to study abroad in Saint Petersburg, Russia. I dreamed of this place since I was in high school. So many people laughed at me when I said I wanted to go there. I feel accomplished knowing that I successfully lived in Russia for over a month and a half, traveled on the metro (which is all in Russian), and lived with host parents (who I still stay in contact with). I see myself as an introverted person, but this experience has taught me to step outside of my comfort zone and learn more about the world.

I learned a little bit of Russian before traveling. I recommend you learn a bit of your country's language before traveling as well. The people appreciate you trying, even if you butcher the language. My program offered staying in a college dorm with American students or living in a homestay. Please consider staying with a family in your country if this is an option. I know you want to make friends with your group so you have people to travel with, and I promise you will even if you don't live with them in a dorm or apartment. Reach out to the people in your travel group but find ways to get to know the people from the country. My host parents made my experience unforgettable and it felt like home.

Also, realize that you will experience some type of culture shock while abroad. One of my favorite things about VIH is that it prepares you for this. I was able to cope with mine because I was expecting to feel it at some point of the journey. You will also see others going through it as well, except they are not prepared for how to cope with it. Don't let them get you down. You will know how to handle this.

Traveling turns you into a storyteller. Your mind will be open to new thoughts and will probably be bit by the travel bug. VIH shows you that if you can travel to a country all on your own, (navigate flights, use their transportation, learn a new language, etc.) then you can accomplish anything. You have worked so hard to get where you are. I wish you the best with your traveling endeavors and everything that follows. Please reach out if you need anything!

Best wishes,

Maranda (2016 Cohort)

Maranda.valentino@gmail.com



Dear Vira,

Congratulations on receiving this life-changing opportunity and a big warm, welcome to joining the Vira family. As you read this letter, you may be feeling a little nervous, unsure, and quite frankly scared. You may even be wondering if you can really do this. I know because, I too had these exact same thoughts before I left for my journey to Italy. Like you, I had never been abroad before and was really questioning if I had it in me to travel all the way there and back by myself, while living in a country where I did not speak the language.

The retreats will prepare for you what it is like to go abroad for the time and a chance to meet others that are in your shoes as well. Take the time to absorb as much information as possible, ask questions, and meet new people. The community that the Vira I. Heinz provides you with is one that is one that you cannot put a dollar amount too.

As you embark on your experience (wherever it may take you), know that at some point something will go wrong. In my case one of the wrongs included missing my connection to London to Rome the very first day. However, yours could be bigger or smaller. Know that you will problem solve and get through it, because Vira's are strong, intelligent, world-traveling women!

Be gentle with yourself. I purposely did not learn Italian so I could experience what an English as a Second Language student feels like coming to America for the first time. I took a beginner Italian course and tried to use what I learned every day! By week four, I had properly ordered a sandwich correctly with the correct toppings. I was frustrated with myself throughout my time for not getting it right the first time, but at the end you cannot be so hard on yourself! In short, make your goals attainable and be kind to you.

Finally, journal and take pictures. You will experience so many wonderful and amazing things, and some that may challenge you. Take every chance you get to write them down to reflect on later and take many, many pictures along the way.

When you reflect upon your time abroad later, you will be so impressed with all you accomplished. You will use this time as pivotal time where you say if I can do that, then I can do anything.

I wish you an experience filled with adventure, laughter, love, and learning. Safe travels!

Love,

Claire Pilarski

P.S. Feel free to email if you ever need a pep talk, have questions, or want to share about your experience when you return. Claire.pilarski@gmail.com



Dear Vira,

Are you ready? I'm sure you've heard that a thousand times by now, but the cold hard truth is that you're never going to be ready, and that's okay. Your first trip abroad is a time for you to explore. You probably think I'm talking about the literal exploration of a different country - the culture, the food, the religion, etc. -- and you will do all of those things, but that's not what I'm referring to. I'm talking about exploring your innermost self. What are you passionate about? What are you afraid of? How do you handle pressure? What do you do when you're alone? If you were to sit down and answer these questions before and after your trip, you might be surprised at how much your answers would change.

When you arrive at your destination, you will have to change -- to adapt to your new surroundings -- and when you return, you'll have to do it again. These transitions are going to be difficult. At times, you might feel as though you've become a different person in the process, and that is exactly what this program is all about - challenges, growth, and coming into your own. What I want you to know is that hundreds of women have stood in the same place you are right now, and we're all rooting for you. Be brave.

Sincerely,

Your sister Vira



Dear Vira,

You may be afraid to travel alone to a foreign country. I know I was, but the VIH Program has greatly prepared you for this experience. You are equipped with knowledge, skills, and your own unique abilities which will enable you to learn and grow throughout your international experience. You have made connections with other women and you can reach out to them. Try to go beyond your comfort zone. This will benefit you as you return from your experience and finish your education and begin your career. I encourage you to challenge your beliefs during your international experience. Take time to learn about the culture of your country and immerse yourself in it. Ask questions and learn from the country and its people. Be present and in the moment as much as you can. As you return from your experience, reflect on your experience and brainstorm ways that you can make a difference in your local community using ideas from your international experience. Safe travels!

Sincerely,

Allie Gloor



Dear Vira,

Thank you for being brave and confident to take a leap of faith. I am thankful that you are here and ready to try something new. While it can be scary to fly for the first time alone to a country that you have never stepped foot on, this program will **CHANGE YOUR LIFE**. Here are my three pieces of advice to make the most of it:

1. Be open to knowing yourself: While you may think you know everything about your values, this might be the first time that they will be questioned. Don't be afraid to engage in some difficult or new conversations. You never know what opportunities may arise, or activities that you find out that you love by giving it a try (For instance, if you ever go to New Zealand, try Zorbing in Rotorua). Reflection is key to see how your new experiences match your current values and interests.

2. Go for a walk: The best way to take in the world around you is to be a part of it. It can be easy to stay in your room and feel safe, but allow yourself to be a little vulnerable by seeing and meeting the people who make up your community. Walk to where the locals go. Journal on a bench in a nearby park of the things you have seen and heard. It may seem simple, but being present is a way to better immerse yourself in what makes your location special.

3. Vira women are your support system: While there are hundreds of us in this incredible network, I would go to bat to help any fellow Vira who is in need. These retreats may just be two days, but the relationships last a lifetime. These women are your future inspiration, and with your Campus Coordinators and Sarah Wagner guiding you, you should have nothing to fear.

It will be a transition going away and then coming back, and you might feel like your friends and family could never fully understand what you have gone through. Know that you can always share your experience with me and any other VIH awardee because we are excited to learn about your adventures, your goals, and how you are living out your dreams as a global leader. This program is just the beginning, and you are here for a reason. Continue to represent women travelling internationally with pride, and you are going to have an amazing time. Best wishes for this next step of your life's journey.

Sincerely,

Katie Flanigan, 2013 Cohort



Dear Vira,

CONGRATULATIONS!!! You should be so very proud of yourself. You discovered this award, you applied, and you EARNED it!

I'm sure there are a lot of emotions going through your head: excitement, fear, anxiety, curiosity, pride, joy, and everything else in between; all normal and all things I felt in your shoes, as well. What I say to that is that I am a firm believer in having the courage to critique the things we love, which includes VIH. And I assure you the VIH program is a program I firmly believe in and stand behind. It has changed my life, the lives of many others, and it absolutely will change yours, too. In ways you can't even fathom. The opportunity to travel abroad for the first time, the connections you'll make across the world that may just last a lifetime, the hilarious new stories you'll have to tell, the moments that make you question your own identity and take your breath away, and so much more.

And that's just your study abroad experience. Then there's the VIH curriculum, which will address all of your questions and set you up for success not just abroad, but in your career and your life. And know that you are not only entering a program; you are entering a sisterhood. I have never been in a space as unique as VIH. This space will push you to be the best version of yourself. You will see the light of others shine and it will make you inevitably shine, too. And when those feelings of insecurity and self-doubt creep up, other Viras will swoop in and reassure you that you belong and are incredible in your own right!

I am so very excited for this new chapter in your life. You are bright, beautiful, impressive, oh so worthy, and GREATER than you know. Rest assured, the VIH program made no mistake in choosing you. We are LUCKY to have you and I can't wait to see all the ways you add to this space. We need you, your voice, and your essence.

And before I wrap this up, I want to share a beautiful poem passed on to me by my aunt (not written by her!):

Build yourself a City	And on that man-made plain
Found yourself a State	Breathe your last complaint
Do not cry for pity	Slay your shame
Grab and Master Fate	Forget your name
Grab the swamp and drain it	Do not cry for pity
Cut the log and plane it	Build yourself a CITY
Make the hill the valley field	

So welcome, Vira! I hope this poem inspires you and gives you strength just as much as it does for me. Never be afraid of your shine, change the world, and build yourself a CITY!

Love & Light,

Daria



Dear Vira,

I have one question for you: are you ready?

Are you ready for your life to change with the purchase of a plane ticket and a new suitcase? Are you ready for everything you've ever thought about your world to be altered in front of your very eyes? Are you ready to make lasting memories and friendships that you will carry on with you throughout your personal and professional life?

If you have answered "yes" to any of the above questions, you are the definition of what the Vira I Heinz program has to offer.

Hi, my name is Kathleen Rhoa, and I am a part of the 2016 Cohort. I traveled to Prague, CZ. VIH not only matured me as a woman leader, but also as a world traveler with a newfound global perspective. As someone who had never been on a plane before this experience, I had to learn fast and be brave. With that, I'd like to share some advice with you as you start your journey. First of all, *don't panic*. Even if something goes wrong, it is best to remain calm and keep going. As I mentioned before, I had never been in an airport before my journey, and upon arriving to Poland for my connecting flight to Prague, my flight was cancelled. I had no idea what to do, everyone around me was speaking Polish, and I felt very alone and scared; but then I remembered I was a woman leader from VIH. Even though my flight was cancelled, and my ride at the airport could no longer wait for me, I had the courage to get a new flight scheduled and make it to my apartment safely. Those situations can be scary, but as long as you hold your composure, you'll do great!

Next, *live in the moment*. I know it is important to take photos and buy souvenirs to remember your experience, but truly living and breathing the culture of another country is so exciting to do! Sometimes, it is nice to put down the phone and social media and go explore for a while by yourself.

Finally, *have fun*! Your 4-8 week journey is going to feel like it is flying by in seconds. Make the most of your time abroad and find your friends early. With my study abroad program, I experienced the unfortunate situation that most of my fellow program students were only abroad to party and have fun, not truly learn from the classes and culture. So, find your good, true, fellow classmates that are there for the same reason as you, and stick with them. Adventure and travel as much as you can!

Hopefully this letter gives you a little bit of comfort and preparation moving forward.

Remember, all the Viras are like a family, so if you need help or guidance, make sure to find us!

Best wishes in your journey to come,

-Kathleen Rhoa
2016 Cohort
Duquesne University
kathleen.rhoa@gmail.com



Dear Vira,

I'm sure by now you are overwhelmed with the unknown, lots of excitement, and some confusion. Well I can tell you right now that you're not alone. Congratulations on now being a part of something that will truly change your life. I don't just mean going out of the country, although that in itself will be life changing in the best way. But you are about to form this bond with other women that you may have never imagined yourself forming. You will be pushed to think differently and become a better person because of this program. This program, now being a year over with for me, has taught me that each and every one of us brings something truly special to each other's' lives. If we let ourselves open and listen, what we learn from other inspirational people will have an immense impact on our happiness and purpose. I'm sure right now you're reading this and thinking what is this crazy girl talking about? In many different forms, this program has taught me to sit back, listen and take things in with a purpose. Whether that be the retreat, your international experience, or meeting a new Vira from a different cohort. This program will bring you confidence and gratitude for the people you meet in your international experience and everyday life going forward. I wish for you to have an absolutely magical adventure when you go/went to your destination and let those small special moments really sink in. I wish for you to open your mind and heart to all the other women feeling very similar to you and letting them positively influence your life before and after you complete this program. Try not take life too seriously, laugh at yourself, and love all of the unique experiences you now have in your near future. Congratulations again for taking the step out of your comfort zone by joining this incredible program! You have a beautiful journey ahead and as a fellow Vira, I'm always a call or message away.

Love Always,

Andrea