Back in early January, as the Washington, D.C., area was gearing up for another three months of winter, I hopped on a plane to sunny Argentina. While we spend January preparing for another semester and enduring the bite of winter, Argentina is on summer vacation, registering temperatures regularly in the 80s and 90s.

Though I certainly enjoyed the warmer weather, my trip had another purpose: to visit two Argentinian Catholic universities. One of the goals I set for myself as President is to spend some time getting to know our Catholic institutions around the world. Argentina was a great place to start. While there I had lunch with the rector of Austral University in Buenos Aires, Marcelo Villar. We talked about the complicated but important role of Catholic higher education in countries with very prominent secular schools. I walked around their campus and visited their excellent school of business. During my visit, the president of Argentina, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, was undergoing surgery in the university hospital affiliated with their medical school. She chose it over the competing secular university hospitals in Argentina. That really speaks to the excellence of Austral University.

From Buenos Aires, I moved on to the Catholic University of Cuyo. A friend of Catholic University arranged for me to visit the campus and meet their vice rector, Cecilia Trincado de Murúa. We quickly discovered that her English and my Spanish were not good enough to communicate in either language, but thanks to both of us speaking French we were able to have a long talk. San Juan, the city where the university resides, was less flashy than Buenos Aires, but the people were lovely. One of the local newspapers even took a picture of my visit and ran it the next day.

Back on campus in late January, I was delighted to meet with the rector of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, Ignacio Sánchez Díaz. As a result of that meeting, I am looking forward to heading to Chile for a visit to their campus.

Getting to know the Catholic universities in Argentina, Chile, and around the world carries many benefits. We share wisdom and offer advice. We learn to appreciate the great international tradition of Catholic education. But on a more practical level, it allows us to build relationships that will give our students international opportunities. That’s something that we are committed to doing. Our 2011 Strategic Plan calls for the development of student financial support that would allow all of our students to participate in cultural and linguistic immersion programs abroad. This initiative continues a pattern of expanding our global education initiatives that began in 2008 when our provost, James Brennan, founded the Center for Global Education. We live in a world that requires a global perspective. Offering that to our students means providing first-rate opportunities for education abroad, and attracting students and faculty from other countries to study and teach at our school.

Today our Center for Global Education continues to grow. Twelve percent more students are going abroad this spring than last. Our flagship programs, CUA Rome and Oxford, continue to attract many students, but we are noticing that many others are branching out to places like Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Buenos Aires, Santiago, and Cape Town. To accommodate them, we now offer options for education abroad on six of the continents (nothing in Antarctica yet!).

The student response to our growing programs has been extraordinary. Grateful for their experience abroad, some of our students founded CUA Global Ambassadors, an initiative that enthusiastically encourages participation in education abroad. As a parent, I recall that our own children had the same response. They emerged with a fresh perspective and greater maturity and independence. As our programs at Catholic University continue to expand, I hope that even more of our students will take advantage of the wonderful opportunities we provide for gaining a global perspective.