This cultural assignment allowed me to view our American culture with a whole new perspective. Three topics I will be discussing were very interesting for me to learn about and I am sure you will be interested in reading and gaining a better understanding of cultures other than our own. I was fortunate enough to have a group with two members originating from different countries. So I was able to gather all sorts of information about their cultures. Our group consisted of two natives of the United States, Ananda and me. The other two group members are wonderful women, Honorata from Poland and Martha from Colombia. They exchanged such interesting information about their lives in their homeland with Ananda and me. We were informed about all sorts of information on the fundamentals of education and the norms of family life both in Colombia and Poland. Also, their diets in these countries are so much different from ours. There are some similarities and some differences that we have discussed that would definitely be beneficial information for me to know if ever I was to travel to either country.

The first topic I will be discussing is education in Colombia and Poland. Colombia’s educational system is somewhat different from ours here in the United States. Here, we require children to attend school from kindergarten through twelfth grade; whereas the 1991 Colombian Constitution only requires children to attend school who are between the ages of five and fifteen. The school day also varies according to the region and climate in which the school is located. The majority of Colombian schoolchildren have to wear uniforms and attend school in the early part of the morning until around lunch time because of the hot climate. Another reason for the earlier schedule is because many poor Colombian families want their older children to work and earn money for
their family. Usually, the children either do not finish their education because of their location, or their family needs them to work. The location is a huge factor in a child’s ability to receive an education because facilities in poor city suburbs and rural areas are very limited. Also, some children in rural areas cannot continue school because there is no secondary school to attend in their region. Because of this, the problem with illiteracy is the worst in rural areas of Colombia. Most children attend primary school, but fewer than sixty percent attend secondary school. Private schools are available, but are usually attended by children from wealthy families because they are too expensive for most families because they charge such high fees.

Colombia has more than 200 schools of higher education, 71 of those schools being universities. Most of the universities are private and very expensive. Colombia’s main university, however, is run by the government and is the National University in Bogotá. The most fascinating fact concerning education in Colombia that I learned from Martha was about the educational and literacy programs that are played on the radio to remote areas of Colombia for adult education. Education is highly regarded in Colombia and even those who do not have much money try to complete as much schooling as possible. They also learn to speak English. In the U.S., at least in Florida, students are required to take two years of a foreign language in high school and college in order to receive a bachelor’s degree, yet very rarely do people speak a foreign language fluently. But in other countries learning a language other than your native language is considered very beneficial and is taken seriously.

Honorata from Poland is a perfect example for the rewards people receive when they are bilingual. She has only been living here for one semester’s time and speaks as
though she was born here. I had no clue she was even from another country. But because she paid attention in school and learned how to speak English she was able to come to the United States, attend H.C.C. and receive an affordable education. While in Poland she could not afford to go to a private college and her grades, even though they were very high, were not high enough for her to receive a free education.

I learned

I got to learn about different aspects of the process of education in Poland from Honorata. She told me about the free educational programs that are offered to students with high grades. She also shared with me some information about the common behaviors of students in secondary schooling programs. She educated me of the fact that the curriculum in Poland is much more difficult than that of the U.S. Besides the curriculum being more difficult, there is also a lot more material covered and tested on in order to advance students to higher grade levels.

Honorata informed us that cheating in schools in Poland is viewed as normal behavior and is a necessary action taken by students in order to pass exams. Students even take tests for each other. Even in college the professors know that most of the students cheat and they excuse this behavior. The professors actually make it so that they cannot see the students while they are taking exams so that if questions arise of whether or not students were cheating the professors would be able to say that they did not see it happen. Honorata told our group that if students were caught cheating they would be expelled, but because professors hold newspapers in front of their faces or leave the room while exams are taking place it is very difficult to be caught cheating. But not all students cheat in Poland. She even said that students work together by making little miniature cheat sheets and passing them out throughout the college campus. She finds it
strange how students here, in schools in the U.S., are so solemn and keep to themselves and do not help one another with the work load. Other than cheating being a common factor in education in Poland, students also try to learn to speak other languages. In high school it is a requirement to learn two foreign languages, English being mandatory, and either German, French or Russian as the elective. German is the most common language taken in school.

My second topic is the difference in foods and eating schedules in Colombia and Poland. Colombia is divided into different regions, Atlantic, Pacific, Central, Oriental, and the Amazon. Each one of the regions has their own unique style of food. In Bogotá, for example, there is a popular soup called Ajiaco made with three types of potatoes and chicken. The most important meal in Colombia is lunch and takes place between noon and two o’clock. Breakfast and dinner are usually smaller meals. The Colombian people usually have coffee in the morning with bread, and sometimes orange juice. Dinner is eaten whenever people arrive home from school or work. In Poland, it is common to only have two meals a day, whereas in Colombia and the U.S. people usually eat at least three times a day if not more. In Poland, they eat breakfast anywhere between one and five in the afternoon and supper is somewhere between six and nine in the evening. People in Poland do not eat as much frozen foods and fast foods as we do in the United States. Most of their meals consist of vegetables and fruits. Fish is more popular than pork or beef. One traditional food in Poland is the pierogi, which is basically a flat piece of pasta folded around potatoes mashed with seasonings. Their society is not as focused on indulging themselves with unhealthy foods as we are in the U.S.
My third and final topic discusses the common family in Colombia and in Poland. Families in Colombia are more of the traditional type of family. Both the men and women work to support the family in most cases. The average income for each worker is $250 a month. One reason families are more traditional and tightly united is because families with lower incomes have to have their children work as well in order to afford living expenses. So family members not only live together, but also work side by side as well developing a closer bond with one another. Family members in Colombia are also much more affectionate with each other than in the U.S. and in Poland. It is common for men to hug and kiss other men on the cheek. The typical family’s household consists of a mother, father, siblings, and some extended family members. Either the grandparents or possibly an aunt or an uncle lives with the family. These extended family members either work to help pay the bills, or they sometimes stay at home and take care of the younger children and tend to the household chores. Martha told our group that some wealthy families have maids who do everything, from taking care of the chores to raising the children. It is common for children to live with their parents until they are either married or in their mid-twenties. And sometimes if children marry, their new spouse moves in with the family rather than just the two newlyweds moving into another house. It is financially beneficial for newlyweds to live with their family until they start having children of their own. Most families are religious and attend Mass every Sunday together. The majority of the religious population is Catholic. This is the case in Poland as well, the major religion being Catholic.

The families in Poland are not as traditional as Colombian families. However, Honorata did say extended family members in Poland do live in close proximity to each
other. Extended family members also help in looking after younger children if the parents are single and have to work. In other instances children are sometimes left at home by themselves while parents go to work because most people in Poland do not have the money to put their children in a daycare facility. It is more common for children to stay with family members or friends. It is also common for children to live with their parents until they are married or until they get their education and/or establish a career in order to be able to support themselves. Children usually do not leave home until they are around twenty-six years old. Also, families allow their children to be full time students during high school and college. Honorata said that it was very rare for a high school student to have a job unless they were from a lower class level and had to help their family pay the bills. Also, college students usually do not have a job until their third or fourth year. Families are very supportive of their children getting a good education and allow them to dedicate themselves to their studies.

If ever I traveled to Colombia or Poland I would definitely experience culture shock and have a difficult time adapting to my new surroundings. Just having had conversations with my group about their cultures in their own countries amazed me and left me in awe. If I went to Colombia I would first need to learn how to speak Spanish, because that is their native language in that country. I would definitely have a difficult time getting used to the temperature change because my skin is very fair, more adaptive for cooler and not so sunny climates, so I would definitely have to stay out of the sun and heat. Also, I would have to adjust myself to their daily schedules. They are more used to getting up earlier to work and go to school because it is cooler in the mornings. I would
have to buy a bicycle in order to get around from place to place because Martha told me that was the common way of transportation.

If I were to travel to Poland I believe I would have a difficult time adjusting as well. I would need to learn how to speak Polish, even though English is taught in schools there. It would be necessary for me to learn not only the languages but also my surroundings and know different locations. Public transportation is very popular in Poland due to the high prices of gasoline. I have never ridden a public bus so that would be a huge adjustment I would have to go through. Other than learning to speak a different language and finding my way around a foreign country, I would probably have an even harder time adjusting to people in Poland’s eating schedule. I am a normal spoiled pampered American who is used to being able to appease my grumbling tummy within ten minutes just by pulling into a near by fast food place. In Poland, however, fast food is not at every corner street. Plus, they only have two meals a day and I would not survive on only two meals a day. Maybe I could take four but that is even a huge change.

To say the least if I traveled to either Colombia or Poland I would undergo extreme levels of culture shock. With the information I have learned from Martha and Honorata, however, I would be somewhat prepared for some of the behaviors and characteristics had by people. I now am educated on the differences of how people are educated in both these countries, I have been given a good description of how people grow up and with what types of atmospheres their family provides for them. I also know some types of foods and at what times during the day I would be expected, or in my case allowed, to eat. I have learned other details about these different and interesting cultures and am glad I have had this different opportunity to learn about people and cultures other
than my own. Colombia and Poland are very different countries compared to the U.S. and each has so many unique characteristics that I am sure people would find very interesting by others. I think this cultural assignment was a great way to not only learn about other people and places but also learn more about my own country and its characteristics. While exchanging information with my group members I was able to look more in depth to my own culture and I am glad to have had this different kind of learning experience. I think all college students before entering into the “real world” should actually experience some of the real world!