

Melissa Benner
Cultural Anthropologist

Melissa Benner was unsure how to proceed after graduating from the University of Wyoming with a degree in Anthropology. She had an eight week internship lined up for the summer with the Park Service, but her future beyond the summer was uncertain. Melissa knew that graduate school might fit into her life goals, but she was unclear on what her real interests were. She attended Dr. Lin Poyer's career workshops, and took her advice: "If you aren't sure what graduate school you want to go to and what you want to study, hold off." Melissa held off.

That May, Melissa received a University email asking "Do you want to improve your Spanish and live in Spain?" The opportunity was for a teaching assistant position at a Spanish school, and it peaked Melissa's interest. Dr. Poyer forwarded the same email to her inbox. Melissa decided to take a chance. Her decision to apply came in "a split second." Her application was completed that May, and in October she was on a plane to Spain. Melissa says, "From that experience, I now live on the premise that if something sounds pretty good, you might as well make it happen."

After completing two academic years as a teaching assistant in Spain, Melissa decided that it might be time for graduate school. She helped a fellow American teaching assistant complete a graduate school essay and realized that she was "ready to go back." She had always been interested in cultural preservation. Melissa remembers, "I would spend hours googling different things and looking at different anthropology programs. My favorite thing to do while traveling was to tourist watch. One thing led to another in my mind and out came studying anthropology and tourism and how tourist programs can be a means of cultural preservation."

Melissa did not know what she wanted to do upon graduation, so she used that time to work abroad and learn more about herself, the world, and her interests within it. "It was the observations from a few different countries that helped me find what I wanted to study in graduate school," Melissa recalls. "I think it's nice to try different things within our field. I'm an advocate of trying things out and taking advantage of opportunities."

Melissa just completed her fourth field season with a CRM archaeological company. While she is content in her job, the experience has reconfirmed her passion for cultural anthropology. And she knows she can redirect her career path toward cultural work whenever the right opportunity presents itself. Why? Because "once a trained ethnographer, always an ethnographer."