

Certificate in International Learning Capstone Project

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Completing the Certificate in International Learning has been one of the most enlightening and humbling experiences of my university journey. After spending a semester abroad, studying a new language, and taking various inter-cultural courses, I find myself somehow simultaneously feeling the most culturally competent yet incompetent I have felt before. Reflecting on my experience completing this certificate, I think my feeling of incompetence arises from now knowing just how complex and nuanced cultural competence and successfully navigating an international context really is. However, the ability to now recognize this signifies just how much personal growth I have experienced in the areas of self-awareness and my understanding of how I fit within a global context. While being acutely aware of how much more room there is to learn and grow, I feel more equipped than ever before to navigate different cultures and acknowledge the importance of viewing the world from a global perspective. Furthermore, I feel increasingly confident in my ability to both understand and build connections with people from all over the world, which is a skill I am extremely grateful to be developing. Through the remainder of this Capstone Project, I hope to offer some insight into the various experiences that shaped my CIL journey and allowed me to come to these conclusions.

I spent five months in Munich Germany during the spring/summer of 2023. Ironically, I pursued this semester abroad experience without even being aware of the Certificate in International Learning. Engaging with the course material and other certificate requirements after has thus given me ample opportunity to reflect on my experience abroad and how under prepared I really was. Before going to Germany on exchange, I had never travelled anywhere in Europe and spoke almost no German. I had truly thrown myself in the deep end in terms of experiencing a new culture and did not even fully realize this until I arrived. I remember how shocked I felt when I went to a Bavarian government building to register my new address and realized that most of the staff did not speak English at a level to conduct official government business. Reflecting on it now, I cannot believe that the possibility had not even crossed my mind that I may need a translator or to call ahead to confirm that their services were offered in English, as I held the assumption that I would simply receive accommodation. Now, I can recognize the ethnocentricity of my previous perspective, as well as the privilege underlying my belief that the people in Germany would just adapt for me, rather than vice versa. I am extremely thankful I chose to approach my experience with reflection, perseverance and humility, and allow moments

like that to challenge and alter my beliefs. I feel that because of this, the next five months turned out to be one of the most transformative times of my life thus far and resulted in the creation of lifelong connections and lessons.

While in Germany, I completed two German language courses. Learning and engaging with the language fostered a deep sense of connection and presence with the country that I did not expect. I became the biggest eavesdropper while commuting to University on the U-Bahn as I wanted to practice my listening comprehension, and have never felt so excited to order a latte at a local coffee shop. Having never learned a second language before, I did not realize how much the learning extends past communication and delves into a deeper understanding of the culture and one's identity in general. I learned so many colloquial sayings from German friends that made absolutely no sense when translated to English; "Das ist mir Wurst" literally translates to "this is sausage to me", a phrase that is used to say the speaker is indifferent or does not care. It feels very silly to say I felt connected when I learned the meaning of such a phrase, but it felt like a little piece of German culture that surpassed what one would learn just visiting Germany. The language enabled me to feel as though I could integrate further into the German community, as I was slowly transitioning into a space where I did not require people to constantly adapt to meet my needs. The more time I spent in Munich, the more I found myself in a strange in-between of existing somewhere in that vast grey area between being a tourist and a local, which made me recognize how powerful language is in determining one's identity.

I took the Indigenous Canada course through the University of Alberta to satisfy my co-curricular requirement, and it built significantly on the concept of cultural identity and how culture influences our beliefs and values. Having grown up in Canada and learning about Canadian history through school, I felt as though I had a relatively comprehensive understanding of Indigenous history within Canada. However, taking this course after having had completed most of my requirements for the Certificate in International Learning allowed me to think much deeper and critically about Canada's brutal history of colonization. For example, I feel as though prior to learning another language and seeing the connection it allowed me to feel with German culture, I did not fully understand the impact and consequences of Canada's residential schools stripping Indigenous children of their language. Furthermore, it allowed me to recognize that a

significant proportion of Canada's cultural values and beliefs are influenced by the history of European colonialization, which has therefore allowed me to better understand my place in both an international and historical context. This has been accompanied by a greater awareness of many taken-for-granted beliefs I have held and allowed me to reconsider how these beliefs have shaped my understanding of the world. Most importantly, I feel I can now more fully contextualize present-day issues concerning Indigenous peoples and think critically about ways in which I can support Indigenous rights and advocate for Canada to do the same.

I think the biggest takeaway I have had through pursuing the Certificate in International Learning has been the development of my ability to understand and be aware of my own cultural beliefs and thus thoughtfully and intentionally explore other cultures. I often use the analogy of having one planted foot and one searching foot to describe this; Having two planted feet would mean never being able to leave where I am, but having two searching feet would likely result in me becoming lost. Having a strong understanding of my own culture and beliefs allows me to critically explore other cultures while choosing what to integrate into my own beliefs and values, through recognition that I can understand but not necessarily agree with different cultural practices. This has also allowed me to resist immediately assigning judgement or meaning to others' behaviors and has encouraged me to first consider the ways in which my own cultural values are influencing how I perceive what was done. This is a skill that I know will not only serve me in a global context, but also in my day-to-day interactions and relationships with others.

If I could give advice to any student considering participating in the Certificate in International Learning, having now (almost) completed it, I would say without a doubt that they should pursue it; I think there are very few programs that are as genuinely life-altering as this one, and I believe anyone who has curiosity about the global world would have much to gain from their own CIL journey. I experienced many moments that felt deeply uncomfortable and difficult, but resulted in personal growth and learning that I can confidently say I would not have experienced otherwise. I hope others also choose to take the leap and walk away having gained some of the greatest lessons of their undergraduate experience.