

CIL Capstone:

A Summer in *Certified* Experiential Learning

(Because it was definitely an experience and I am getting it certified)

By Jennifer Toro-Barrera

word count: 1247

Certificate in International Learning 2026

Political Science & MLCS 2026

1704447

Two weeks before your flight, your world collapses.

Everything around you — your family, your plans, the fragile stability you had so carefully built — begins to crumble at once. Grief arrives first. Then uncertainty. Then the quiet panic of realizing that life does not stop simply because you are hurting.

With your life in a million scattered pieces, you gather what you can and pack it into two suitcases.

A quick escape to Montreal follows — a breath before the world catches up again. But grief is patient. It travels well. From there, you find yourself in a small airport that somehow feels as chaotic as New York, the kind of chaos where speaking Spanish becomes a quiet superpower — the difference between waiting and getting a taxi on the fly.

Welcome to Washington, DC.

Your driver is Latino. The moment he speaks, something inside you softens. His voice carries warmth, humor, that familiar latinidad that feels like home. He understands without explanation, the visa nerves, the anxiety sitting heavy in your chest, the uncertainty you are trying to outrun.

He reassures you gently. Everything can be checked online. It's going to be okay.

“Bienvenida a Washington, mita.”

And somehow, with that simple kindness from a stranger who feels like family, the circus in your mind quiets. The noise does not disappear, but it moves — settling into a smaller corner where it no longer controls you.

“Que Dios me la cuide, mija. Suerte.”

He drops you off in front of a brick building with bold letters: The Washington Center.

Your home for the next few months.

Your distraction.

Maybe even your reinvention.

Inside, the receptionist greets you with a stone-faced professionalism. You take a breath. You smile first.

“Good morning!”

Her demeanor shifts instantly. She hands you your keys.

“You’ll be fine, honey.”

And just like that, “Americans” feel a little less intimidating.

You drag your two suitcases to the “*fourth floor, end of the hall.*” The apartment door opens to an empty space. Room B. Two twin beds. No sheets. No pillows.

For a moment, you laugh.

Is this a psych ward? Did life actually break me?

Instead of spiraling, you do something grounding. You go to Target.

TARGET. Fluorescent lights. Dollar section. Endless aisles of curated normalcy. The most American of American rituals. Literally it’s called the Mall of America. Burlington next door, shopping carts overflowing, consumerism as comfort. And somehow, buying sheets and a pillow feels like reclaiming control — small comforts that make a room feel like yours.

The next morning, you wake up.

It’s your birthday.

Twenty-one.

This summer is either going to destroy you or transform you.

In the kitchen, you meet your roommates. One is Cuban and you instantly recognize the rhythm of home in her voice. Later, when you answer a call from your mom, she overhears.

“IT’S YOUR BIRTHDAY?!”

You blink and suddenly you are in a taco restaurant off the Green Line, surrounded by strangers singing to you like you belong there.

And just like that, you are not alone.

Then it’s your first day at The American Legion.

The DC Headquarters is large and imposing, the kind of building that reminds you that institutions are older and bigger than you are. But at the entrance stands a tiny Puerto Rican woman who warmly smiles and directs you to the fourth floor: Employment & Education.

Where your cubicle becomes your second home.

The walls slowly fill with photos, sticky notes, inside jokes, and quiet encouragement from your fellow interns. Your work family checks in when you grow quiet. They teach you how to advocate for yourself.

They tease you about walking too slowly and tell you to walk “more American”, which apparently just means walking faster.

But what they really teach you is this: Americans move quickly. Through sidewalks. Through meetings. Through systems.

But working with homeless veterans teaches you something different.

It teaches you that systems move fast but people fall through them quietly.

You begin to understand the interconnectedness of everything you had studied in classrooms: housing policy, mental health access, employment barriers, and bureaucratic delays. Veterans experiencing homelessness are not isolated stories; they are the outcome of layered systems, global conflict, federal policy, local resource allocation, and economic shifts.

You see how global decisions ripple into local realities. How wars abroad return home through veterans navigating healthcare systems. How immigration, language, and identity shape belonging. How policy becomes personal.

Studying abroad did not just teach you about global systems in a classroom. It gave you language for what you were living.

Through coursework, you developed knowledge of international systems and global interdependence. In DC, you watched those systems materialize through legislation, funding allocations, and nonprofit partnerships. Experiential learning transformed theory into faces, names, and stories.

You began to understand interconnectedness not as an academic concept, but as lived reality.

As a First generation Latina navigating professional spaces in the United States, you became deeply aware of culture as a worldview. You noticed communication differences, directness, pacing, body language. You saw how bilingualism was not just a skill, but a bridge in professional spaces. You learned to move between worlds without losing yourself.

Your culture becomes more than comfort; it becomes connection. It allows you to build trust.

You learn that intercultural competence is not just theoretical but it is practiced in kitchens, in cubicles, in Ubers, in taco restaurants, and in those moments of discomfort.

You also learn that community is survival.

You would have fallen through the cracks that summer if people had not looked out for you — the Uber driver, the receptionist, your roommates, your coworkers. Small kindnesses that held you together when everything else felt unstable.

And so you begin to understand what it means to be a villager.

A villager looks out for her neighbor.
For her fellow American.
For her fellow human.

People who did not know the full weight of what you were carrying, but who carry a piece of it anyway.

That is what global citizenship means to you now.

So, your study abroad was never just coursework - it was a lived experience.

Shocker

It was about understanding global systems not as distant theories, but as forces shaping daily life. It was about recognizing that culture is not a monolith, that American identity is layered, and that your Latin American upbringing is not separate from your professional aspirations — it informs them.

It is learning that interconnectedness is not optional; it is reality.

Local and global issues are inseparable. Language is power. Cultural humility is strength. And public service requires both speed and stillness. The ability to navigate systems quickly, but also the willingness to slow down enough to see who is slipping through.

Truthfully, by the end of the summer, nothing in your external world had magically resolved.

But internally, something had shifted.

You arrived in Washington fragmented.

But, you left understanding that reinvention is not about becoming someone new, it is about integrating every part of who you are into the spaces you enter.

And those parts of you did not destroy you.

It initiated you.

Into public service.

Into intercultural leadership.

Into becoming the kind of person who notices when someone else is about to fall and reaches out before they do.