

Certificate in International Learning Capstone Project

My Unexpected Journey of International Learning

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To say that the various experiences I had while completing the Certificate in International Learning (CIL) complemented my degree would be a lie. It was the *heart and soul* of my academic journey, bringing me a depth of worldly knowledge that I will forever cherish. This here is my journey, the one that happened oh-so-unexpectedly, but led down the windy, but beautiful path of personal growth, development, and life-long learning.

An Afternoon in Edmonton

October 23, 2023 was nothing more than a random Tuesday. I wandered into the relatively-new student commons in the business building to see 50 chairs set up in neat rows. Only 5 people were sitting at the back, seeming more interested in whatever they were doing on their laptops. I sat down and listened curiously.

It was an exchange info session, and students were presenting on the cities they had gone to, mostly European destinations like Vienna, Nice, and Munich. I pulled out my laptop, mimicking the short-lived attention spans around me, and opened the exchange website. As I browsed destinations, I stumbled across Thailand- a country I knew almost nothing about. I was immediately intrigued.

When the session ended, I ran up to the tall man who seemed to be in charge. “I’m interested in Thailand!,” I said, weirdly confident. His face lit up. “No way! We’re supposed to send at least 5 students a semester, but no one ever goes!”

Why doesn’t anyone go? I thought. Regardless, I felt such a strong calling. I was gonna go to Thailand, whatever that place meant.

Don’t Talk About the King!

Before my departure, I had to complete a variety of safety and risk procedures, assessing political, environmental, and safety risks that could occur that are specific to Thailand.

Upon doing research for the “political” section, I learned that Thailand was run by a monarchy, and it was illegal to speak negatively about the King. I also learned that on October 6th of 1976,

46 students were lynched dead by the Thai police force for protesting against the government. That school, Thammasat University, would be the same school that I would be attending. This came with a heavy weight. Was this place *actually* dangerous?

My Journey

July 29, 2024 was the date of my departure. I left for a 36-hour journey with stopovers in Seattle and Seoul, heading into a side of the world I had only known through Google.

When I finally arrived in Bangkok, my luggage didn't. I walked out of the airport alone, carrying only a backpack, and was immediately met with chaos- humidity, pollution, and endless traffic. It was nothing like I had imagined. I arrived at my apartment close to midnight and slept on a bare mattress, confused and overwhelmed.

The first few days were lonely and disorienting. I woke up at 4:00AM with jet lag, questioning what I was doing there. I wandered the streets, tried unsuccessfully to track down my luggage, and felt completely alone. One morning, I called my mom sobbing, telling her I hated it and wanted to come home.

Rather than completely admitting failure, I decided to give myself one week. One week to try and meet friends, get out of my comfort zone, and try to see what this place actually has to offer. To my surprise, that same day I got added to a group chat of exchange students meeting for breakfast. I went, and needless to say, that small act of courage flourished into a semester full of friendships and adventure.

Reflections of Thailand

I travelled almost every weekend, venturing into the mountainous North, the luscious beach-filled South, and even to neighboring countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia. I hiked a volcano, went on a 4-day motorcycle trip through Northern villages of Vietnam, got my scuba diving certification, and spent a week learning how to surf.

If you look at my Instagram, that's probably what you think my trip was. But when I think of Thailand, this is not what comes to mind. I think of my daily life in Bangkok. I think of getting my smoothie every morning from B, and how some mornings, I would walk past and not have my wallet on me, and she would insist that she makes me a smoothie anyways and I could pay her back another time. I think of the mediation class I attended every week, where I would sit in a circle of people, each from a different country and age demographic to talk about things like love, death, and purpose. I think of the school's library, where you could leave your entire ecosystem of Apple products unsupervised for hours without having to worry that anyone would steal it. I think of the families that would invite us into their houses for a free meal. I think of street vendors and Grab drivers lighting up when I tried to speak Thai, sitting with me patiently and helping me practice. I think of a culture centered on trust. I think of people that embody an unwavering sense of kindness, even though they might not have much.

Reverse Culture-Shock

In the pre-departure modules I completed before my trip, I learned that “reverse culture shock” can almost be worse than “culture shock” itself. But like many things, I couldn't actually comprehend this until I experienced it.

The period following my exchange was extremely dreary. I had gone from a life full of adventure, sunshine, and connection to a life that felt grey and dull. I noticed that my communication style and values were now completely different. In Thailand, we spoke to each other with our hearts. “Per baciare l'anima,” my Italian friend would call it- to kiss the soul. There was no bluffing, no fakeness, no masks. We spoke words we actually meant.

I considered going on another exchange. But instead, I decided it would be better to build my life in Canada and bring everything I had learned home. Once again, I used my “one week” tool.

CIL Journey

This is when I discovered the Certificate in International Learning Program.

My minor in international business fit perfectly with the CIL-required courses, and I took many classes involving global trade, economics, and international marketing. Learning about the world through coursework is much more out-of-touch than simply lived-experience in different countries. Nonetheless, they were interesting and informative. One of my favorite projects I did was in BUEC 442, titled “Unravelling Argentina’s Economic Tapestry”. We discussed the long and complicated corruption of their government, which led to inflation, the devaluation of the Argentinian Peso, and the creation of the black market for Pesos. When I eventually make my way down south to Argentina, I’ll know that the real exchange rate is not the one listed on google, but by the black market rate that vendors sell on the street. Through this, I learned that corrupt governments can completely shed a dark cloud over a vibrant country and peoples, which is something I experienced in Thailand as well.

A particularly meaningful thing to me was the intercultural communication training I took. We completed personality tests and stood in different corners based on whether we were “influencers,” “dominant,” “conscientious,” or “steady.” When I stood with my fellow “influencers,” I felt an immediate sense of connection. We were loud, expressive, and conversation flowed effortlessly. However, when I went to other corners with people of the other personality types, I found the opposite to be true. People were quieter, conversation was awkward and significantly less vibrant. I realized that I actually like people who are more “like me”, and we can definitely communicate better. I think this same bias explains why many students hesitate to go on exchanges, especially outside of Europe or North America- it’s more comfortable to choose what feels familiar.

I also found a lot of purpose in speaking about my exchange. In completing various co-curricular requirements, I wrote articles and was interviewed about my experiences, I presented at info sessions encouraging students to embark on exchange, and I had many coffee chats with students wanting to go. I learned that my voice is powerful, and that it is so easy to publicly speak about something you are passionate about. Being the “influencer” I am, I realized that this is a superpower I can use to connect people, get people out of their shells, and inspire others.

It's safe to say that completing the various components of CIL gave me the meaningful conversations and introspection that I longed for after coming back from Thailand.

Conclusion

To sum up my experience completing the International Learning Certificate in an essay, let alone a conclusion, would be totally narrow compared to the vast amount of knowledge and life lessons I've gained. But here's my attempt.

I've learned to be courageous, and to give myself "one week" before abandoning something difficult. I've learned that learning itself comes from everyday experiences like a chat with a stranger, or a smoothie vendor who trusts you without question. I've learned that global systems shape everyday life, from currency exchange rates to freedom of speech. I've learned that people naturally gravitate toward what feels familiar, and that real growth begins when we step beyond that instinct.

Most importantly, I've learned to live with radical openness- not only abroad, but at home.