

Going into my first long term journey abroad last summer, I was a bit skeptical about whether I would come back to Edmonton as a changed person. I always saw myself as someone who was already quite self-aware and knew exactly what my strengths and weaknesses were (and how I would go about building on those). Admittedly, I scoffed at the students who returned from their travels and went on about how much they had learned about themselves. Furthermore, as a political science major, I figured I was already familiar enough with the atmosphere I would be experiencing in Washington, DC and saw my educational background as enough to equip me for whatever lay ahead. Looking back, I wouldn't say I was closed-minded but rather I was worried that the trip would challenge me in unexpected ways. I was feeling a combination of a fear of the unknown and doubt in my own ability to be resilient in the face of upcoming challenges.

One of my greatest weaknesses has always been adapting to big changes in my life. I get quite emotionally invested in the comfortable routine I create in one place. When I travel, I've noticed that I require certain things from home to remain a part of my life in the new location, or I begin having anxious or depressing thoughts. In the group discussion I had at the CIL Orientation, it was great to hear some of the strategies that other students had used to cope with the emotional strain they felt while travelling. For me, ensuring I was still going for daily runs and regularly Skyping with my friend circles back home were strategies that worked. For others, it was just bringing along a token reminding them of home or having their families send them care packages throughout the term. While I was in DC, I noticed a real difference in my mood when I put in the effort to take care of my emotional health. Thanks to the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale, I embarked on my trip abroad with an awareness of how weak my

hardiness (specifically my emotional resilience) really was. At several points during my time in DC, I found that I would get irritated and want nothing to do with the social events planned by my roommates or the program coordinators. There were even days when I didn't even want to go to things that I had looked forward to all summer (e.g. touring the NPR headquarters and going inside the Capitol Buildings). I think most of these feelings came out of the fact that I didn't have my old friends there to enjoy it with me. I guess I felt guilty for taking in all these iconic political monuments without my fellow political science friends and that guilt manifested through feelings of loneliness.

Apart from navigating my emotional reactions to the trip, there were many challenging moments that actually became the highlight of doing the Certificate in International Learning. On the second day at my internship site (Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain), I was assigned the task of writing short speeches for last year's Human Rights Council in Geneva. The task was daunting as I didn't have a foreign policy background and had not done very much political writing on the topic of human rights. From this experience, I realized just how much my emotions tend to take over when I'm presented with a spontaneous or unfamiliar task. Even though my rational side knew I had the skills to do the job, I worked myself up into believing it would be painful to complete. Throughout the next month, projects like these kept getting directed my way. I got a chance to write statements for Special Rapporteurs on everything from women's rights to access to mental health care to torture and the death penalty. Doing this consistently throughout the summer actually made me more excited about taking on challenging work. Often, I find that I get comfortable with doing the same kind of work or writing about the same topics because I know I'm able to do it very well.

This usually holds me back from putting myself out there and taking on a more challenging type of writing or writing about topics that I may not have as much knowledge about (especially as a student journalist for *The Gateway* here on campus). Working at ADHRB helped me become more open to failure and expanded my knowledge of unfamiliar topics. As a student, I had always rushed to the safety of courses on Canadian politics because that was my area of expertise but after returning from this trip I found myself enrolling in a seminar on American foreign policy and another on the surveillance state. Now that I'm reflecting on it, my passions have changed drastically thanks to the few months I went abroad.

Along with my passions, I also experienced an existential shift in my view of the world. In learning to accept the random projects that were thrown my way, I learned to take life less seriously. Everyone around me constantly seemed to be so preoccupied with "networking" that they missed out on some really great opportunities that just sort of came out of nowhere. Instead of worrying about whether I was meeting enough people or going to enough events around the city, my new friends and I became grounding forces for each other. We often reminded each other that the experience isn't about exchanging business cards with every well-dressed person you meet but it's instead about establishing genuine relationships with the people you come across. Not everyone you meet has to stay in your life or provide you with your dream job. By fully embracing this mindset I found that a lot of really great experiences just happened. One night, on my way back from checking out the Senate Chambers, I walked into a protest being organized by Senator Cory Booker. Another night, I randomly went biking at the National Mall with a few friends and we were notified of a protest happening at the Hill. Turns out, all the Senators were voting on a major healthcare bill that night so I had a chance to

interact with politicians I've looked up to my entire degree, including Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Kamala Harris. It felt like a dream and seemed to have only happened because I wasn't trying to force things to happen.

This is an important lesson I've learned about the political world. There are so many people trying to follow a linear path (run for student body president, lead a party, become Prime Minister, etc.) that they fail to see how just doing what they're passionate about will actually open many more doors. Upon returning home, I did the Intercultural Communication Training and further hashed out this realization as I spoke to other students who had had similar experiences. Some of the best stories people told at the training had come out of spontaneous moments. The lessons learned from miscommunications and getting lost in an unfamiliar environment were far more valuable than the planned experiences. It was so intriguing to hear the stories behind the objects each participant brought to show everyone during the activity we did on the second day of training. I noticed that the value of almost every object shared came out of a story in which some sort of personal or larger societal lesson was learned. For example, one of the participants brought the lunch tiffin she used while in India and explained how it became a symbol of how much she'd been able to connect with her parents' culture while she was there on her own. As someone who had been born and raised in Canada, she felt the tiffin was her connection to her roots. I think this not only reinforces the idea that travelling broadens the mind but also reflects how the further outside your comfort zone you are, the more you'll grow and really learn from your experience abroad.

When I got back from DC and did the Intercultural Effectiveness survey again I found that my score for hardiness and emotional resilience had improved significantly. After reflecting

on my certificate experience, I find this satisfying. I'm glad I'm ending my degree knowing my experience abroad changed me and allowed me to grow in an area I didn't think I would ever improve. As I enter the political workplace, the personal and global lessons I learned during my time in DC were consolidated through the various activities I got to participate in through this certificate. As I move out of academia and into the real world, I look forward to more travels abroad and allowing myself to be challenged even further.