

**Certificate of International Learning Capstone Project**

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This summer I spent three months as an intern at the University of Rostock's Marine Science Center (MSC) as a research intern. While this was how I achieved the abroad experience component for my certificate of international learning (CIL), I was thankful for how the previous elements of my CIL journey had provided me with the confidence to pursue this opportunity, and prepared me to thrive in an intercultural environment. I was awarded a scholarship through the German Academic Exchange Program to assist in a research project investigating the sensory cognition of California sea lions, but ultimately ended up contributing to several other studies in progress at the MSC. Living aboard the ship, my daily activities included cleaning the animal enclosures, preparing fish for animal training and feeding, recording data, and of course assisting in training the animals and conducting experimental trials with two California sea lions, one South African fur seal, and 14 harbor seals. In addition to enriching the biology and psychology focuses of my degree by shaping animal behaviors through positive reinforcement to teach experimental paradigms, this experience immersed me in Northern German culture and embodied the full range of values and skills I had accrued thus far in my pursuit of the CIL.

The main cultural factor that encapsulated my CIL experience was language, even beyond the French language I was studying in my courses. Upon accepting my abroad opportunity, I began using a language learning app for German in hopes of gaining a basic understanding in case of emergencies. While my lab team and most locals all spoke English fluently, they were more comfortable communicating in German. After initially feeling left out of conversations and opportunities to connect with my team, I quickly found that taking a backseat and paying attention to my coworkers as they expressively shared stories in German proved a much more efficient strategy in picking up the language. After learning some basics through my app and by asking what a word meant if it came up repeatedly, I expanded my vocabulary and began inferring the topic of conversation then asking my supervisor to confirm my understanding. Slowly, and after many humorous misinterpretations, I began to impress my coworkers with my ability to understand their conversations and respond in English. These fumbles

reminded me of the CIL orientation, in which we shared such misunderstandings in intercultural settings; thinking back to the stories from other students helped me normalize and embrace my mistakes as the first steps in learning something new. In my experience, I misheard the Northern German colloquial word for “to look”: “kucken” as “kuchen” (meaning cake). Until I could hear the difference, I think my lab group must have thought I had a big sweet tooth, as I would often ask if somebody had made a cake.

My next endeavor was to respond in German, which took practice and involved me piecing together my vocabulary into a German sentence which my supervisor would then correct. I also got some additional practice during animal training; I was required to use German commands and feedback to the animals who did not respond to English. Language learning evolved from a side project motivated by my own curiosities into a way to connect with the people around me in a more meaningful way. This helped me develop stronger relationships with my research group, as well as establishing a group of friends outside of the lab who I met at the rock climbing gym in town. My coworkers were more than willing to help me learn, and they often expressed their appreciation for my efforts to integrate into their existing way of communication instead of expecting them to conform to my own. Since learning in intercultural communications training about how spoken language is intrinsic to both identity and culture, my learning of German felt important to demonstrate respect and embrace the culture and community of my workplace. I attribute much of the depth of personal connection and understanding to the shared dynamic of meeting in the middle in regards to communication, and I value immensely the opportunities this opened for fostering both friendships and a deeper understanding of the culture.

As another requirement of the CIL, I undertook improving my French to the level of second-language competency. While I have always enjoyed learning French in the classroom I was surprised to experience the unifying nature of language with other francophone travelers while abroad in Germany. While surrounded by predominantly German and English speakers, I believe that finding others who spoke French facilitated the quick establishment of friendships between others I met while on

weekend trips and staying in hostels. Since it was more rare to find French rather than English speakers, the connection felt more uniquely familiar and personal. By stepping in to help a Parisian girl in front of me check into our English-speaking hostel in Copenhagen, she and I bonded quickly and ended up spending the day with my two other roommates— another from France and the other from Switzerland. Our time together felt so surreal and true to the core values of the CIL; how the four of us had come from three separate countries to be united in Denmark by our similarities, rather than intimidated by our different backgrounds. The extra companionship made the weekend trip much more enriching, and I was in constant awe of how comforting it was to each of us to have been united by our sharing of a common language. Upon further reflection and incorporating my learning from intercultural communication training, it is evident that language is not only a key component of regional culture, but also to personal identity. Meeting others who speak the same language establishes an instant connection of relatability, and instills a warm sense of relief and familiarity, which is especially refreshing when traveling abroad in a foreign environment. While my first language is English and I was lucky enough to often encounter other native Anglophones, I was eager to offer this same comfort to those who spoke French. I was thankful for how pursuing a second language competency as part of my CIL journey provided me with the skills and confidence to engage with other French speakers.

My abroad experience felt like the epitome of my CIL; it incorporated all other elements into a holistically enriching way to complete my certificate. My enjoyment and confidence were largely facilitated by how I felt prepared with the skills needed to succeed in a global context provided by my language learning and intercultural communications training, while the stories shared by fellow CIL students throughout the orientation and co-curricular events also quelled my anxieties. By engaging in my degree courses and abroad experience through the lens of the CIL, I was challenged to consider the applications of my studies in a greater global context. While it may seem paradoxical how extending our focus beyond ourselves contributes to a greater personal connection, the CIL as a whole has exemplified

how conceptualizing the relevance of my degree through a broadened worldview makes my learning more meaningful, versatile, and well-rounded.