

Capstone Project

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How It All Began

By my first semester of third year, I thought I had the entirety of my degree planned out. Then came SCSOC 225, when my professor introduced the class to the *La Rochelle Program* taking place in June 2025. As a Campus Saint-Jean student, I was drawn to the uniqueness of the program, from host families to a one-month structure, but mainly the location and language of study. When I first began my undergraduate studies, the possibility of studying abroad was always a consideration, but never felt like a dream that could become reality. An impulse decision led me to apply for the immersive study abroad experience, and I was pre-approved by the coordinators in a matter of hours.

Preparing my pre-departure and orientation requirements over the next few months led me to discover the Certificate in International Learning (CIL), and it was my return to Canada that made me realize I could qualify. Suddenly I had a way to connect the seemingly unrelated elements of my university experience with a certificate recognizing its distinctive nature. Declaring such a certificate the summer before my fourth year was certainly ambitious, but it quickly became clear that the program was less about adding requirements to my degree and more about giving coherence to the experiences I had never thought to connect, both inside and outside the classroom.

Discovering France

Before departing for Europe, the extent of my French cultural experience was limited to Quebecois and French Canadian practices. Even having pursued my undergraduate degree predominantly in French had never quite provided the “rich immersion” experience that I had hoped for. Completing the study abroad portion of my certificate bridged many of those gaps and strengthened both my appreciation and understanding of the diversity that exists within the francophone world.

Living in France, even for only a month, challenged many of my assumptions about French culture and daily life. The “My French Cultural Moments” course provided an outlet for me to identify my assumptions and stereotypes before departure, and compare them with my discoveries by the end of the program. Rather than confirming the idealized or simplified version of France that I had imagined, the experience exposed me to a more complex and ordinary reality.

Staying with a host family for the program was one of the most impactful parts of the experience. It allowed me to separate from the touristic version of France and become attuned to the ordinary rhythms of meals, conversations, and shared space. Communicating in French outside of the classroom forced me to think differently about language; it was no longer just an academic subject, but an essential tool for connection. Immersing myself in another francophone culture allowed me to adapt to different regional dialects and vocabulary changes, while also building confidence in my ability to communicate across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

One of the most surprising, and sometimes jarring, realizations was how visible my own cultural habits became once I was in a different environment. Small things like meal times,

conversation styles, and politeness suddenly felt less universal than I had originally assumed. I began to understand my own cultural background as one worldview among many, rather than a neutral default.

By the end of the program, I felt less like I had “visited” another culture and more like I had briefly participated in it. That small shift, from being an observer to a true participant, changed the way I think about cultural differences. Culture became something that was no longer abstract or distant, but something truly negotiated through our everyday interactions.

Intercultural Communications

While my time in France was a defining experience of my certificate, and of my degree as a whole, the CIL encouraged me to reflect on the broader range of my academic and extracurricular activities. My courses in sociology and political science had already introduced me to ideas of culture, identity, globalization, and power, but my certificate pushed me to see how these concepts could realistically connect to my lived experience.

A few months following my return from France, I had the opportunity to partake in intercultural communication training. Though many of the elements of both the online and in-person sessions overlapped with my previous course learnings, the workshop really forced me to reflect on how my own assumptions and communication habits shape the way I interpret others.

Through interactive activities and discussions, I became more aware of how easily misunderstandings can arise from differences in expectations, values, or communication styles. What might seem direct or efficient to one person can easily feel abrupt or impolite to another. These realizations reinforced the idea that effective intercultural communication is less about memorizing cultural “rules” and more about approaching others with curiosity and patience, a skill I wish I had developed prior to my departure.

The training also made me reconsider moments from my time abroad that I had not fully processed at the time. Situations that had felt like awkward encounters or simple language barriers began to take on new meaning when I viewed them through an intercultural lens. I started to fully recognize how expectations around time, conversation, and social space differ across contexts, and how those differences shaped my reactions. This reflection helps me understand intercultural communication not as a single workshop, but as a skill that develops gradually through experience.

Current Implications

Looking back, the Certificate in International Learning did not simply add new experiences to my degree, but also changed the way I interpret the experiences I had already undertaken. It gave me a framework for understanding how local actions are connected to global systems, and how culture shapes everything from communication styles to personal attitudes.

One of my biggest takeaways from the certificate has been a deeper appreciation for the diversity within the francophone world and my own place within it. Studying in French at Campus Saint-Jean had already shaped my academic path, but living in France and reflecting on

intercultural communication made those experiences feel more interconnected. The certificate encouraged me to see language not only as a medium of study, but as a bridge between cultures, perspectives, and communities.

The certificate further helped me recognize that global issues are not as distant from my everyday life as I had once believed. Topics encountered in my courses, such as cultural influence, identity, and international cooperation took on a whole new meaning as they became more immediate after living in another country. These experiences made abstract concepts feel more personal and concrete, encouraging me to pay closer attention to how global systems shape local realities.

The certificate also influences how I think about my future. Whether I pursue further studies, professional work, or community involvement, I want to remain engaged with global issues, intercultural dialogue, and the francophone communities I encounter. The experience of living abroad, combined with my coursework on intercultural and global issues, has shown me that international learning doesn't only happen overseas, nor does it happen solely in classrooms, workplaces, or communities. Instead, international learning is an ongoing conversation between those elements, reinforced by our own lived experiences and unique stories.

Ultimately, the Certificate in International Learning has helped me to see my education as part of a larger, interconnected world. It has encouraged me to be more curious, more reflective, and more open to perspectives different from my own. For me, that shift in mindset reflects the most valuable outcome of the program.