

CAPSTONE PROJECT
Between Cultures, Beyond Assumptions

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“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”
— Marcel Proust

When I began my undergraduate studies, I saw myself simply as a student building a future – studying criminology, working in residence life, forming friendships, and adjusting to a new country. It was through the Certificate in International Learning that I began to notice something I was overlooking, but what was so central to my journey: how I was learning to see the world differently, and how culture was shaping far more of my life than I realized. I unveiled that culture shapes how we define success, how we communicate, how we understand justice, and how we see ourselves in relation to others.

My CIL journey has not been about learning *about* the world in an abstract way. It has been about learning to recognize cultural influences where I once saw normality, and understanding how those influences shape both everyday interactions and larger social systems. This awareness has affected not only my academic interests in criminology but also how I live, lead, and relate to people around me.

One of the earliest shifts in my thinking came from my transition from India to Canada. Growing up in India, many of my beliefs about success and responsibility were shaped by expectations that emphasized constant effort, discipline, and productivity. Rest could be interpreted as laziness, and creative pursuits such as dance were sometimes seen as distractions from more “serious” goals. Decisions about one’s future were not always understood as purely individual choices but as something shaped by family expectations and social norms.

Living and studying in Canada gradually challenged these assumptions. I encountered a different cultural understanding of well-being – one that recognized balance, self-care, and personal autonomy as essential rather than indulgent. This shift became visible not only in classroom

discussions but also in institutional practices. Through my work as a Resident Assistant and later Senior Resident Assistant, I observed how seriously mental health and work-life balance were taken. Breaks were encouraged, professional boundaries were respected, and weekends or vacation time were understood as periods of genuine rest. There was an expectation that people should not be contacted unnecessarily outside working hours, reflecting a broader respect for personal time and sustainability.

Experiencing these norms reshaped how I understood productivity and achievement. I began to see burnout not as evidence of dedication but as something harmful and preventable. More importantly, I realized that ideas about success, effort, and even personal worth are culturally shaped. Recognizing that my upbringing reflected one worldview, rather than a universal standard, was one of my first meaningful lessons in global awareness.

While my personal transition introduced me to cultural difference, my academic experiences helped me understand how deeply culture is embedded within systems of power and justice. One of the most transformative moments in my learning occurred through my Indigenous studies coursework. Learning about colonization, residential schools, and intergenerational trauma revealed the extent to which legal and social systems are shaped by historical and cultural forces.

Before this, I had largely understood justice as a system of laws and institutions designed to respond to wrongdoing. Through studying Indigenous histories and contemporary realities, I began to understand that justice systems are not neutral. They reflect power structures, cultural assumptions, and political histories. I understood that colonization is not simply a historical event confined to one country; it is part of a global pattern of displacement and cultural control that continues to influence social and legal institutions today.

Recognizing these connections changed how I viewed both local and global systems. It became clear that social inequalities are not isolated problems but are shaped by historical relationships that extend across time and place. Justice, I learned, cannot be separated from culture, identity, or history.

Beyond academic knowledge, my CIL experience has significantly shaped how I communicate and interact across cultural differences. One of the most meaningful examples of this was learning about the practice of the talking circle within Indigenous communities. In a talking circle, participants share one at a time, often guided by a talking piece, ensuring that each voice is heard without interruption. The emphasis is on listening with patience and respect rather than responding quickly or competing for speaking time.

What stood out to me was not only the structure but the values underlying it including presence, equality, and collective understanding. I later saw similar approaches used in residence leadership training and some of my academic seminars, where sitting in circles encouraged reflection rather than debate. This experience reshaped how I think about communication. I began to understand listening as an active and intentional practice. This became an important part of how I facilitated conversations and addressed conflict in my personal and work life. Learning to adapt my communication style in this way strengthened my ability to interact meaningfully across different perspectives and experiences.

Some of my most significant growth came from encounters that initially made me uncomfortable. When I first arrived in Canada, I had little familiarity with discussions about gender diversity, pronouns, or the distinction between gender identity and biological sex. These conversations required me to examine assumptions I had never previously questioned. Over time, learning about identity as complex and deeply connected to belonging helped me develop greater

empathy and awareness. I began to understand that inclusion involves recognizing experiences that may be unfamiliar, rather than expecting them to conform to one's own understanding.

A similar shift occurred through my work with marginalized communities at NiGiNan Housing Ventures, an Indigenous-led supportive housing organization. Working with residents experiencing addiction, trauma, and social stigma challenged many assumptions I had unconsciously absorbed. Listening to residents' stories and observing harm-reduction approaches grounded in dignity and cultural respect reshaped my understanding of vulnerability and resilience. I saw how structural inequality, historical trauma, and social exclusion shape individual experiences in ways that cannot be reduced to personal choice alone. These experiences taught me the importance of approaching people with openness rather than judgment, which is an essential skill for meaningful intercultural engagement.

Across these academic, professional, and personal experiences, my understanding of global interconnectedness has deepened significantly. Issues such as violence, inequality, and social exclusion are not isolated phenomena but are connected through shared patterns of history, power, and human behaviour. My experiences in supportive housing, residence leadership, and legal environments have shown me that cultural awareness is not optional. It is necessary for ethical and effective engagement within justice systems.

Perhaps the most meaningful outcome of my CIL journey is that it has not provided me with definitive answers, but with more thoughtful questions. I find myself asking how societies can move toward preventing harm rather than simply responding to it. I wonder what conditions foster empathy and reduce violence, and how cultural bias influences who is protected and who is marginalized. I think about the relationship between human societies and the natural world,

and how cultural values shape our treatment of both people and environments. These questions reflect an ongoing process of learning rather than a completed one.

Looking back, my CIL journey represents a progression from experiencing culture, to analyzing it, to interacting across it, and finally to recognizing my role within global systems shaped by it. I began this journey shaped by cultural norms I rarely questioned. I now move forward with an awareness that culture influences how we define justice, communicate, and understand one another. For me, international learning is not simply about crossing borders, but about *'having new eyes.'* It is about learning to see more clearly, listen more carefully, and respond more responsibly in a world where human experiences are deeply interconnected. That awareness will continue to shape how I learn, lead, and engage long after this program ends.