

# **Reflective Essay**

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If I have to make a one-sentence summary for my college life, I would say: it was three years making decision without regret. Life is an exam with endless multiple choices. Sometimes you will never know if it is right or wrong because you will never have a chance to see the result of the other choices. Thus after high school I have learned to trust each decision I have made and try to do the best I can no matter what comes after that. While almost approaching the finish line of undergraduate school, I suddenly realized it is this way of always working hard that keeps me continuously moving forward toward new challenges and leaving no regrets behind. Three years have passed and I have learned numerous things from these decisions that I'd like to review before the memories fade away.

### **Decision 1: CEP? CEP!**

I entered the University of Washington (UW) with an offer to Environmental Science and Resource Management major. I had a very typical freshman year, taking all the fundamental classes for math, biology, chemistry, and writing composition. Soon, in my second quarter at UW I switched my major to Environmental Studies, which is a B.A. instead of B.S., and more policy focused. I've had a passion for nature and animals since I was little. Caring about the environment has always been a part of my mind. Then, when I thought I would graduate with this degree and a minor in Japanese, a lecture abruptly gave me a completely different option.

One night during spring quarter I just randomly decided to attend a lecture about an international phenomenon of urbanism and there was a Chinese professor talking about a new project in the Pearl Delta in China. I was so amazed by how fast

this process was actually happening in my home country and how many opportunities it could bring. Recalling my memories of growing up and experiencing so much demolition and construction in China, I realized my strong feeling about preserving historic buildings and creating a better city with better living environment never went away. After the lecture, I waited in a long line to talk to the professor and I really want to thank my rare courage and patience that night. Because of this small decision of waiting, I had a great conversation with that professor, which led me to rethink my future career and consider urban planning as an option. From this experience I also learned to “never to afraid to ask”. Talking to different people always means a potential of gaining new information that might open a brand new page of your life. Lastly, you’ll never lose anything from asking.

That night, after returning home, I searched online for and urban planning related major and I found Community, Environment and Planning (CEP) as the only undergraduate program under the Department of Urban Design and Planning. The more I read about plumb manual, which is the guidebook of CEP that explains the program structure, the more excited I became. At that very moment, I knew I found the right major for me. I immediately set up an appointment with Caitlin, the advisor and manager of CEP, and got all the application materials ready and submitted within two days, which was the day of application deadline. Then I prepared 10 hours for the interview and finally got in. The entire process took shorter than a month. This made me believe that spending a longer time making a decision does not necessarily make your decision better. A decision has to be made carefully, but does not have to take a long time. Quick decision could sometimes be blind, but slow decision could also make you miss the best timing and wear down your passion.

There are always times that you can't be perfectly prepared, when unexpected events happen, and it is important to find the most efficient way to do your best when you are unprepared.

The two years of my life with CEP have proved that my decision was right. I especially appreciated the opportunity to design my own educational path and the highly collaborative community structure in CEP, which has made me grow the most. I have broad interests and wanted to explore classes in different fields during my undergraduate career. Among requirement courses listed by other majors, there could always be classes that I am not interested in learning. The Individual Study Plan in CEP allowed me to avoid this and I could gladly say that all the classes I have taken during two year in CEP are classes I like and feel value from taking them. Moreover, the small community of CEP also pushed me to take over responsibilities in a group and speak up in public. The facilitation, the group project, the project presentation, and the committee and forum meetings are all opportunities to practice my leadership and public speaking skills. As a member of the hearthstone committee and an organizer of the 2012 CEP Senior Project Night, I intensively practiced my multi-tasking skills and understood the importance of effective communication and cooperation. I didn't realize how my public speaking and presentation skills have improved until the CEP 461 class, which has same instructor and a similar class structure as CEP 301. When comparing my performances in these two classes during my first and fifth quarters in CEP, I found myself to be more talkative in class discussion and more confident in presentation. My writing and reading skills have also improved that I could finish the reading assignment a lot of faster with better quality than before.

It is CEP that allowed me to always challenge myself with different tasks. It is also this small student running community that gave me endless power and sense of home when I needed support. I have learned practical skills and made life long connections here that would be helpful no matter what I do or study in future. Without this decision, the other decision could hardly happen. Therefore I regard entering CEP as my most clever decision among all decisions I have made these three years.

## **Decision 2: Internship with Planning Institute in China**

Accomplishing 120-150 hours of internship is a part of CEP graduating requirement. I have been thinking about where would be the best place to do my internship for a long time and finally chose to go back to china and working for the Guangdong Urban & Rural Planning and Design Institute (GURPD) for one month as full time internship student. After studying in CEP for one year, I felt urged to understand more about Chinese urban planning systems and whether if it is the environment I want to stick to in future. I have never forgotten my original motivation of studying urban planning is to help create a better and more organic urbanization process and preserving more historic and culture valuable buildings. Thus my eventual destination of life long career will always be my home country. However, there are many different paths to achieve this goal and I am always looking for the one that I think would be the most efficient and valuable.

The GURPD is one of the most influential urban planning institutes in China, undertaking many provincial projects as well as consulting the government to draft the province development and planning guidelines. The institute is always welcoming the western planning experiences and working hard to apply the techniques and

skills from western to Chinese planning system. As one of the internship students, I was able to not only learn knowledge from working there, but also bring some methods that I've learned from U.S. to them, which made this internship very meaningful to me for both things I could learn and give. This was my first time doing an internship in urban planning field. Through the internship, I had two goals to achieve. I wanted to understand what skills are most frequently used in the practical planning field. This would allow me to plan out what I need to learn in the future at school. At the same time, I believed learning while using is the best way to learn skills. With advices from supervisor, I would be able to learn new skills fast and well. Moreover, through working with the institute, I also wanted to know how does the Chinese urban planning institute run, and as a planner in Chinese, what are things that must be known and learned. The context of the urban planning knowledge that I learned from school is very different from that of China in many ways. Working with this large institute could give me very clear idea about the working context of Chinese planners, which could be used as reference when I choose my future employment opportunities.

From the internship, the most important thing I have learned is to accept the imperfection and correctly allocate the time. In planning field, the projects always come right after another. The required time to finish one task was very short. It's important to understand focusing on the main idea before considering about the details and final effects. Under many circumstances, there was not enough time to reach the idea results as I planned to be, and I should be able to live with this. When getting a task, I should first list the priorities of my each part of task, understanding what is the emphasis of the project and what is the expected result from my

supervisor in order to make sure the major working direction is correct. Then the time should be allocated and strictly used according to plan. Perfection is definitely always the most desirable result. But when time and energy are not allowed, I should be able accomplish tasks with imperfection but at the same time satisfy my supervisor.

Moreover, I learned that in a working position, I should never be afraid to ask and speak up. When encountered problems, I usually chose to solve it by myself without communicating with my supervisor since I thought those questions might be stupid questions that I suppose to understand instead of bother others. However, this habit could waste me a lot of times that I could actually save by asking, and at the same time might lead me to wrong direction due to miscommunication. I was afraid to speak up because I thought as an internship student, my words were not important to those experiential planners. And, if I said something wrong, it could lead to a bigger joke. But, after the presentation to all the office leaders, I realized as long as the ideas were good, everyone could be applauded. I should be more confident about myself. I should know my advantages and address them in my work. I could make a difference even as internship student in a hundreds of professional planners' institute.

There are many limiting factors in Chinese planning field that sometimes things have to be sacrificed due to profits. However I was excited to see efforts to change it and emphasizing the real sustainability in planning during my internship. My incentive learning more knowledge about urban planning and historic preservation is to protect my hometown from large-scale destruction and non-residence centered development. This internship has given me more hope and

motivation to keep on what I am doing now. At the end of this internship section, I want to quote a sentence from a classmate in the CEP internship class, that she said “new doors always opens after entering one door”. Same philosophy as I have talked about earlier that I would never be able to know what is waiting for me behind the doors I choose and doors I haven’t. Loosing something at one point might actually point me to an opportunity I have never thought of. Though the process was not that exciting with all the fundamental research work and always working for extra hours, I regard this internship experience as very a necessary step for my future decision-making. What I have seen and hear during the internship are intangible things that could gradually change my understanding of things and influence my potential options of decision.

### **Decision 3: Study Abroad, Go Away!**

I really appreciate CEP for allowing us to take one quarter off for studying abroad. I have been thinking about studying abroad since my freshman year and I actually knew this CHID Berlin program since my freshman year. The full name of the program is called *Germany: Historical memory, Germany Unification, and the Future of the European Union*. It focused on studying how the history and memories of people has shaped the city and ways of building memorials in urban context, as well as how the political decisions has changed people’s sense of identity and their living standard. Germany is always an attractive country to me for its bumpy but glorious history. It is a country reborn from constant violence and ruins. People living on this land understand the meaning of peace and power more than any other people. I admire these people who respect their history rebuilt it with great diligence.



I feel lucky that I had a chance to explore this land, talk to these people, and feel the inner spirit of both.

Living in Berlin for ten weeks gave me so many surprises. The city is so diverse because of its complex history that it is very hard to define this city in several sentences. I was especially interested in how the city has preserved their historic buildings in modern context while still keeping them being functional and alive. I did my independent study on the political influences and identity changes behind the Parisian Platz, the square where Brandenburg Gate locate. I was curious about how political control could alter a city's symbolic site and how the democratic power that came up later has changed this balance. Doing a research in a foreign country that I know nothing about their language was a very new and interesting process. Though most Germans do speak English, the majority available resources were all in German. Thus I had to stay in the library of Humboldt University day after day to get enough information I needed. The last two weeks of writing research paper really made me feel I am a Berliner instead of a traveler. I got up every day and took subway for half an hour to go to class. Then I walked from classroom to the school's library and stayed for the rest of the day doing research. I enjoy my lunch at cafeteria with only 3 euros for a big plate of pork and potatoes. Then at night when the library closed at 12, I needed to walk 10 minutes back to the subway station and took subway home. I usually had a doner kebab, which is a type of Turkish sandwich, at the entrance of the subway station. Even at midnight, there were still many Berliners either taking off from work or heading to a party, taking subway. I did not talk and quickly walked back to my apartment, just like most of Berliners do. Living as a local is the fastest way of understanding the local living style and to see many things you

can't see as a traveler. It is not hard, as long as you carefully observing people's daily actions and follow it.

Studied abroad in Germany also gave me a very fresh experience when my American classmates and I were all foreigners to this country. Both being as foreigners, I surprisingly found that our different culture background and experience in childhood had made our opinion on same issue so different. I have never so strongly noticed this influence of culture differences when I was in U.S. since when we talking about news in Seattle for instance, I pretended I knew less information than the locals did and thus it's very natural to have different opinion. However, when we were in Germany, we were standing on the same starting line and the differences suddenly became so obvious. This has made me to thinking over about how my identity as a Chinese could have influences on my subjective judgment and how important to keep this identity as a part of me and live with it. It is okay, even great, to be different. However at the same time it is important to always keep in mind what does this difference come from and whether there is prejudice in the opinion. In future I will still meeting different people from different background and communicate with different thoughts. What to argue about and what to preserve should have a balance.

This study abroad experience also allowed me to travel to 14 cities in Europe. It was very revealing and inspiring to explore different living and architectural styles. From past internship and class project experiences, I realize the importance of visiting and feeling different cities since all these experiences will later become useful resources and references for new planning and design. Only by going on-site and living with local people can I learn the most authentic knowledge about city's

layout, history and culture. Moreover, I also found out traveling to be an attitude of living, an idea of always keep walking, exploring and enjoying the new findings. It is also about a romantic process of guessing and realizing. Even the time was short, I still went to Florence for one day. At the moment I was standing on the Duomo of Florence Cathedral and watching the sun set bathed this city of the new urban planning and Renaissance origin, the satisfy stayed long and sweet.