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Fall 12-18-2020

A Truly Magical Summer: My Experiential Learning Credit with the Walt Disney World Cultural Exchange Program

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AH 4490F/G - 4493F/G

December 18, 2020

A Truly Magical Summer:

My Experiential Learning Credit with the Walt Disney World Cultural Exchange Program

I have loved Disney for my whole life. As a child, I was read the Disney Little Golden Books to fall asleep and watched Disney VHS tapes whenever I visited my grandmother's house. As I got older, my love for Disney did not diminish but grew. I listened to Disney soundtracks at any time possible and still went to the theatres to see the newest movies. I started to appreciate new aspects of Disney as I got older and only learned more reasons to love it. When I was in high school and searching through YouTube, I came across what became my new dream: the Disney College Program. There were these college students who got to work and live at Disney World. This combined two of my great interests: Disney and travelling. It looked like a dream come true, made specifically for me. The thought of doing a Disney College Program lived in the back of my mind for the years to come. I was able to realise my dream and appreciate Disney in a way I never expected when I participated in the Cultural Exchange Program during the summer of 2019.

There were many options for roles I could pursue in Disney World. We were asked to complete a role checklist before our interview where we indicated our level of interest in the different options. I put high interest in many roles because I was willing to do many jobs if it meant I would be in Disney World. I had high interest in Merchandise, Attractions, Character Attendant, Restaurant Seater, and of course, Recreation Attractions. I was interested in

Recreation Attractions because it seemed like a less known part of Disney and had the potential for the guest interaction I desired. When I learned I was going to be a slide operator at Typhoon Lagoon, I was excited to experience something completely new and, hopefully, stay cool. Little did I know at that time how wonderful and crazy my time in Recreation would be.

When I arrived at Disney, one of my first training days was called “Welcome to Recreation”. All the different recreation roles came together to learn about how we interacted with the magic of Disney. I learned how Recreation Attractions was different from the traditional parks. At the water parks, guests are taking a break from their vacations to be with us. This facilitates a more relaxed environment for the guests and, to a lesser extent, for the cast members. Recreation Attractions is a smaller aspect of the Disney College Programs just as the water parks are a smaller aspect of the whole Walt Disney World operation. Typhoon Lagoon hosts approximately 2.2 million guests per year while Magic Kingdom saw 20.9 million guests in 2019. The budget and operation are by far smaller than the traditional theme parks, but it still works to create a magical experience. With the size and scale of the waterpark, Typhoon Lagoon is a relaxed departure from the busy parks, where at the waterpark you can easily get through all the attractions in one day versus sprinting from ride to ride trying to experience everything in places like Magic Kingdom. With this smaller scale, there are fewer cast members hired to work in the waterparks and therefore less student cast members are deployed to Typhoon Lagoon.

I was told that Recreation Attractions is like a family. I was wary at first because Disney is such a large operation: how could this department be so special? Once I started at Typhoon Lagoon, I understood. Quickly, I knew the names of all the slide operators and lifeguards—but it did help that we all wore nametags. Most of us got along and could make the job fun. Even those

above me in the chain of command were welcoming and made me excited to return to work each day. The coordinators worked directly with the slide operators and lifeguards to maintain regular day-to-day operations. The leaders worked on the more bureaucratic operations that occurred backstage. The coordinators and leaders facilitated a comfortable work environment where I was not afraid to ask questions or seek assistance. They supported all the slide operators and were there to back us up when situations started to get out of hand. Everyone seemed to genuinely care about one another, and this made for a positive work environment. We all helped each other and worked together to provide the best experience at Typhoon Lagoon.

The strongest relationships I built were with the other College Program participants, both domestic and international. We were called CPs (for College Program) by all other employees and even though we were all from different places and led different lives, we connected at Disney. I especially liked my relations with CPs because we all put school on pause to come here. Each of us brought different knowledges and perspectives to working at Disney. This reminded me of SASAH. With everyone in the cohort having second majors, we bring unique perspectives to what we learn. I find this a very enriching way to learn. By having others share their outlook, I can get past any biases and expose myself to a whole new way of thinking.

Additionally, these relationships with other CPs are the ones that have lasted. I talk frequently with the core group of friends I made that summer. We went our separate ways after the program, returned to our different academic programs and social lives but have stayed connected. I reached out to our active group chat when preparing my presentation to talk to them about our experiences. Two of my friends, Sheena and Alyssa were slide operators at Typhoon Lagoon as well. They were able to help me with the specifics of the description of what a slide operator does and what elements were most useful to share with others. Teri, my Canadian

roommate while at Disney, has now graduated and works in the Disney company on the business side, working in guest and support services. She was able to help me define the skills I earned and improved to verify my tangible results. They were all very helpful in developing my presentation and I did a trial run with them all that left us reminiscing about the incredible experience. We looked over photos and shared stories, which ultimately helped me revisit my experience for this paper and presentation. Through hundreds of photos, scribbled journal entries, and the academics reflection for this course, I have an incredible catalogue of the summer.

I also practiced with Francesca and Sam to make sure we knew how to best operate Zoom and work out any technical glitches. This was incredibly helpful because I do not have much experience with screen sharing and presenting online. They also helped me figure out what was most important to say, and what could be left out of my script. When preparing my slides and script, it felt like everything was important. I wanted to talk about every little aspect, I could have easily presented for double the time if you allowed it. But having an outside perspective made me know what should be said and what could be left out or left on a slide. They also helped me in my actual presentation including my pace and timing. I tend to talk fast, especially when I was trying to cram in every detail. By helping me to figure out what was most important, I was able to slow down, take a breath, and hopefully make my presentation more compelling by not speeding through it.

I am always interested to know why people came to work at Disney and what they got out of it. This part of the experience reminded me of SASAH, but I was also aware of how much I saw SASAH in everything I was doing and how it prepared me. Everything SASAH has taught me whether it be in a lecture or in an unofficial lesson, I have taken with me. I do not know if I

could have been accepted to the Disney program without all I have learned with SASAH. What we learned about persuasive rhetoric with Dr. Arntfield enabled me to write a successful cover letter and resumé that allowed me to advance past the first step of the application. All the presentations and networking we practice in SASAH gave me the confidence I needed to succeed in my interview. Group projects have conditioned me to work well with others and collaborate to reach a common goal. This was very important when I was working on a slide that required multiple positions, because if the group was not working as a team, we would be less efficient. It was important to keep open communication, so we could listen and respond to what each other needed. The language credit requirement in SASAH pushed me to explore and learn Spanish. I was able to use this knowledge to understand guests who only spoke Spanish and assist them, even if it was for something small, like directions. This is just a short list of how SASAH prepares us for the real world. The internship program is incredibly valuable because it lets us apply the knowledge we get from SASAH and learn something new with the experiential learning. Working at Disney taught me so much more than the basics of my role. At first glance, being a slide operator simply looks like working on attractions by pressing buttons and saying, “Go”. I learned so much more than that from my time at Disney, both within and outside of my specific role.

At first, I did not think I was going to ever be comfortable as Typhoon Lagoon. As a safety critical role with a lot of procedures to remember and implement every day, I thought I was going to be very serious at every shift. When training began with reading operational guides that were 65-115 pages long, I knew this role was no joke. In my first few shifts I was nervous and wanted to make sure I did everything perfectly. But just like every other job and experience, it gets easier with time and repetition. I started to know exactly what to do and safety spiels were

memorized. And I made mistakes, but none that ended in disaster and I got to learn from each one. I was able to take feedback and do better the next day. But ultimately, I liked going to work. Sure, it was hot and tiring, but it was also fun. I had a supportive and wonderful community of slide operators, lifeguards, and leader to enjoy the long shifts and late nights. I liked helping kids overcome their fear of slides and having moments of guest interaction here and there. That is where I got to make a difference, and hopefully make someone's vacation just a fraction better. I did not always have opportunities to have great and long conversations with guests but if I could make little moments of magic, I would be doing my job right. By the end of the summer, I was a good slide operator.

One of my main goals of my presentation, and these assignments at large was to make sure people did not think I took an extended vacation and got to count it as an internship. As I made my presentation and prepared to speak on my internship, I could not help but think of how different my internship was from my classmates. They worked in law offices, and established programs, while I was in a waterpark. When Dr. Mahon introduced my presentation, he said something along the lines of, 'now for something a little different' which assured me that everyone understood my presentation and experience as a non-traditional internship. I knew that it was a little unusual, but I knew I would be doing something interesting and in any placement at the Disney company I would be learning a lot. Slide operating would not be usually considered experiential learning, but I tried to actively engage in my experience in a more enriching way to make this more like the cultural exchange it presents to be. Some ways I did this was having meaningful conversations with other CPs, being critical of my experience, and trying to connect this internship to other university experiences. However, listening to my classmates, I realised many of them gained similar skills in different placements.

Some skills I earned or improved include leadership, teamwork, communication, and problem-solving abilities. I learned how to exercise my authority and be more assertive in taming disorderly situations. I learned how to quickly control these situations and maintain a good attitude when possible. Another situation that stands out, was a private event called Riptide. This was a part of the gay pride festival called “One Magical Weekend”. The event ran from eight pm to two am, and the park was full of adults, with tickets only sold to eighteen plus audiences and an open bar for those twenty-one and up. For this private event, some rules of the parks shifted slightly. Usually, the park is completely smoke-free, and if a guest would like to smoke, they must exit the park and go beyond the parking lot. For Riptide, smoking was allowed in the parks. At Riptide, there were copious amounts of alcohol, smaller bathing suits than usual, and taboo activities including substances and physical activities happening in the change rooms (all Cast Members were explicitly told to not enter the change rooms that night). It was a complete shift from the family-friendly day time activities and brought a unique set of challenges.

Many guests that night were drunk or high. I would look at a guest to give them instructions and see their pupils blown wide. We had to be very aware and cautious that night. We had extra lifeguards and management on hand to account for any situation, although I am unaware of any serious complications that arose. Rule enforcing was both easier and more difficult. For the most part, the guests would listen, were very respectful, and fun to deal with. However, anyone who is drunk or high might have a harder time paying attention and following rules the first time. We handed out many reminders that night but for the most part, it went alright. This night tested our abilities to enforce proper procedure, maintain communication, and for all slide operators to work together to get through the event. Honestly, I remember the night as quite fun. It was by far the latest I had ever been at work and most of the other slide ops that

night were CPs. This event was less than a month after we had first arrived, and this experience bonded us together. To this day we reminisce on some of the wild happenings of that night. Disney is the place to go if you want to experience the most and least magical moments and learn about all kinds of guest service and interaction. Everything we do, even if it was strict rule enforcing, was done with a smile. This was usually possible, but when guests seemingly did not respect our position, it became much more difficult.

As a younger cast member, I found guests were less willing to listen to us as CPs. They did not see us as authority figures when we were “just” college or university students. I do not think guests understood the lengths CPs have to go to the work at Disney World. There an application process, including a one-on-one interview with a Disney cast member to even be accepted, but after that, we still need to fill out many forms and provide documentation, including a criminal record check. I had created a portion of my presentation to include a timeline and steps to the application process for the CEP but had to remove it due to time restraints. It was interesting to lay out all the steps and see how far in advance I had to think about participating in the CEP. I applied in October of 2018, interviewed on January 22nd, and was offered the position on February 11th to begin the program in Orlando on May 13th. In between, there were many steps of gathering documentation and unofficial steps that included multiple Facebook pages and group chats with applicants. It was fulfilling to see all the work that had gone into being accepted into the program.

I cannot say that my summer was perfect. Slide operating was a more physically demanding job than I anticipated and working in the Florida heat every day can get to you. It was tiring and busy and some days I spent more time at Typhoon Lagoon than anywhere else. Guests are not always magical and are willing to yell at cast members even when the issue is out of our

control. I could not tell you how many times guests were explicitly rude to me because their child was too short to go on a slide. With all these challenges, I became more resilient. I got better at customer service and guest interaction. I learned something new from every interaction. But all my possible complaining seems less important when I could blow off steam on my days off in “the Most Magical Place on Earth.”

Working for Disney was the reason I applied for the program, but I cannot pretend there were not incredible benefits, like the ability to go to the theme parks on my days off. The social aspects of the program were a great perk that made this summer as wonderful as it was. I was able to connect and make friends with people from all over the world. I know I made some lifelong friends and we still talk all the time. We were able to make memories in Disney World and be a part of all that magic. I meet my favourite characters from the Disney Little Golden Books, like my favourite princess Ariel, and saw shows that put me in my favourite movies from the VHS tapes. I let myself get swept away in the magic of it all.

The fireworks at Magic Kingdom make me cry almost every time because I would relate to different parts of the nightly show called “Happily Ever After”. They show triumphs of bravery, friendship, family, love, adventure, heroes, and following your dreams. There are traditional fireworks, but this is supplemented by projections onto the castle, narrations, and specified soundtracks. This is how the narratives of bravery, friendship, and love are actually portrayed. The summer I was between high school and university, my family went on a Disney vacation. When we watched the fireworks that day, one quote stuck out: “Each of us has a dream, a heart’s desire. It calls to us. And when we’re brave enough to listen, and bold enough to pursue, that dream will lead us on a journey to discover who we’re meant to be. All we have to do is look inside our hearts and unlock the magic within.” This meant a lot to me when I was

about to transition to university and start a new adventure. Going into SASAH and pursuing a degree that interested me, instead of what others thought best, was a journey I was excited about. I was hoping university would help me discover who I was and what I truly wanted to do. And it did: being in SASAH and discovering all my interests led me to do the Disney College Program.

Fast forward two years, and as I watched these fireworks on my last day as a cast member, they meant even more. A new quote struck me: “And so, our journey comes to an end. But yours continues on. Grab ahold of your dreams and make them come true. For *you* are the key to unlocking your own magic. Now go. Let your dreams guide you. Reach out and find *your* Happily Ever After.” I *had* let my dreams guide me, and they brought me to that very moment, closing out the most magical summer. It was hard to leave Disney: it seemed like that *was* my happily ever after. But as our closing announcement at Typhoon Lagoon says, “Alas, all good things must come to an end.” Pursing a dream is so fulfilling and by the end, it can all seem bleak because it’s over. I will forever be grateful for being able to have this experience and make it more enriching by making it a SASAH credit. It was tiring, exciting, tough, fun, frustrating, but above all else, magical. I cried with my friends that last day because we all had to part ways and say goodbye to this dream come true. But that’s the nice part about dreams: once one comes true, it’s time to find a new dream.

At the end of a magical summer and plus one year, the question remains, where do I go from here? I cannot help but think of what my next steps with Disney will be. I know I am not done working for the Mouse. With all the possibilities the Walt Disney Company has to offer, I could see myself working with them again. Currently, I have taken another step as I am working as a seasonal cast member at the London Disney Store. It’s been very interesting making magic in a new way. First of all, there is COVID to think about. I have worked in retail before but never

wearing a mask the whole time and trying to stay two metres from guests. It presents unique challenges, especially when trying to show off products but not wanting to touch them too much. While this has been a great opportunity and I have already learned a lot, it is not necessarily what I hope to be doing forever.

I could do another Cultural Exchange Program, and this is intriguing to me because going back as an alumna would allow me to take on different roles, including ones that require previous Disney experience, like being a Character Attendant. Another option I am very interested in is the Cultural Representative Program. This program is a full-year placement in the Canada Pavilion in the World Showcase at Epcot. The World Showcase features eleven nations, and each pavilion offers an immersive experience of “travelling” to that country. Every pavilion is staffed almost entirely by cast members from that country. These cast members are considered cultural representatives and enrich the experience of being in that country. I truly considered applying for the program after graduation. As someone who does not know for certain what I want to do after my undergrad, this program felt like a productive break. I would be able to make some money, gain work experience, and figure out what my true path may be. However, this program has been suspended as well. All Disney College and International Programs have been cancelled until further notice. I will keep refreshing the job postings and waiting to see if they announce it beginning again because I plan on applying when possible. Another option is the Disney Professional Internships, a program for students and recent graduates that puts them right into positions working with industry leaders in many fields associated with the Walt Disney Company and all their subsidiaries. Doing an internship in communications or guest experience would be very interesting and allow me to apply what I have learned through SASAH and

experiential learning. Both programs would be great steppingstones for me with the Disney company.

I had a few questions after my presentation including, if working for Disney changed my perception of the company. This question gets asked a lot of people who work for Disney and get to see backstage and how the magic is made. We know how character performers work and little secrets that explain some of the magic, but overall, I did not find that this broke the illusion or made for a worse experience. Rather, it made me appreciate how the parks work even more. Seeing all that occurred behind the scenes made me realize just how much goes on to make the simplest things happen on stage. There is a great amount of magic that goes unnoticed but is produced by the hard work of countless individuals both directly in the parks and those involved in every step of conception and creation of our favourite park attractions and moments.

But working for Disney also allows me to be critical of my experience and how at the end of the day, Disney is a corporation that aims to make money. I shared a little of this opinion when answering this question. I loved my CEP and think it was beneficial to me, but I must be aware that student labour is beneficial for the Disney company as well. Student and internship rules operate differently from people who are hired with a part-time or full-time position. Students, in compliance with program rules, must work holidays and irregular schedules and are subject to different pay, benefits, and employment rules. There are a few ways that the student programs are advantageous for Disney. One example is the housing complexes. The College Programs operates off the slogan, "Living, Earning, and Learning" where they promote living in close proximity to the parks, with a cast bus system for the convenience of CPs. However, this convenience also makes Disney a fair amount of money. Students must pay rent in these apartments, in my year the prices ranged from \$110-220 per week depending on the style of

accommodation. For example, I lived in a two-bedroom, two-bathroom, six-person apartment, and paid \$112 per week. That rent multiplied by six, by the number of apartments there were in each complex, equals a fair amount of revenue from CPs. I'm not trying to say the Disney company is evil for charging rent, rather this is an example of how they know how to make money. I do not want to be cynical after this experience, because it was still a magical summer, but I do want to be critical and aware. Simply accepting everything Disney does with a smile or by looking away when things get questionable is not an option. They must be held accountable when possible. We can raise questions and concerns about the portrayal of certain peoples in their media or how they operate in the parks regarding labour rights and rules. Sometimes tradition gets regarded as more important than progress in the parks. For example, when Disney released their decision to change the Pirates of the Caribbean ride to remove a reference to a wife auction, some fans did not see the harm in the original and preferred it over modernizing the ride. But we must acknowledge how historic or even fictional depictions have real effects and consequences. The change happened and now it is a pirate auction for stolen goods, reducing the ideas of harm to people and women as property. Disney has adapted with innovations in many ways. The rides are state of the art, and they are always on the newest fashion trends, so we know they can be current and adaptable, this should apply to all aspects of the company. This often takes some public pressure, so I am happy to be critical while enjoying Disney when and how I can.

Working for Disney gave me an appreciation for the company that I would have never gained otherwise. In our very first training session, we learned about the company's history and how much Disney means to people all around the world. In times of darkness, Disney can offer hope that goodness and magic will always exist. Childhood wonder is only a Disney movie

away. In my opinion, you can never grow out of Disney. It will always hold a special place in my heart and, from what I witnessed this summer, that is the same for so many. Seeing behind the scenes let me understand how much work and care goes into every aspect of Disney. Disney cast members have a great pride in what they do, and without every department working their hardest, Walt Disney World would have never been the success it is today. Walt Disney said “You can design and create and build the most wonderful place in the world. But it takes people to make the dream a reality.” I am so fortunate to have had a tiny piece in making this dream a reality. This summer will always hold a special place in my heart what I have loved on-screen and in books came to life in front of me and I got to experience with people that now mean a lot to me. But in all honestly, it was my dream that became a reality this summer.