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BLI Internship Award
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Public Statement: Inuit Leadership in a Changing Arctic

This summer, with the support of the Barger Leadership Institute, I had the opportunity to intern for Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) in Anchorage, Alaska. ICC is a nonprofit that advocates for the Inuit, the native people who have inhabited the Arctic regions of Russia, Alaska, Canada, and Greenland for untold generations. My internship was a tremendous learning experience that exposed me to a new culture, a spectacular land, and new ways of thinking about leadership and sustainability.

My internship was run through the Program in International and Comparative Studies Arctic Internships Program, which has an ongoing relationship with ICC. As a double major in economics and environmental studies, I was eager to learn from Inuit leaders, who need to think about the economic, cultural, and social well-being of their people, as well as the rich Arctic environment upon which every element of this well-being is fundamentally based. The Inuit are a hunting people who traditionally lived by hunting marine mammals, fish, and game. Many Inuit live in isolated villages with no road access to the outside world and lead subsistence lifestyles closely tied to the land. Therefore, environmental sustainability is a critical issue for Inuit leaders. At the same time, when gas and milk cost ten dollars a gallon in remote communities with few opportunities for employment and little infrastructure to create such opportunities, economic development is just as critical. I was interested to see how Inuit leaders from the community to the international level balanced environmental protection and economic development.

My main project during the internship was the creation of a first-draft proposal for an Inuit economic development summit in Alaska in 2017. The summit comes from the vision of ICC President Jimmy Stotts, with whom I was lucky enough to work closely throughout the internship. Jimmy is charismatic, wise, funny, and instantly commanding of respect. He is Inupiaq Inuit from Barrow, Alaska’s northernmost town, and has worked for Inuit corporations on circumpolar Inuit issues for over 40 years. Jimmy told me to give him and the ICC executive board a starting point to work from in the planning of the summit, which will be the first to bring together Inuit from across the Arctic to discuss common matters of economic policy in their communities and boardrooms. My final proposal included a list of invited organizations, an essay on three broad topics of discussion (Industry- Emerging Opportunities, Emerging Threats; Circumpolar Cooperation; and Community Infrastructure), and a review of potential funding sources. I loved this project because it let me think independently and get a broad base of knowledge through my own research on the Alaskan economy, economics in isolated Northern communities, and subsistence practices.

The summit proposal project also gave me the chance to go along with Jimmy to meet high-level leaders at several Inuit corporations based in Anchorage. For example, I once found myself in a room with Jimmy, himself one of the world’s most influential Inuit leaders, and Wayne Westlake, the CEO and President of NANA Corporation, which represents Inuit in an area the size of Oregon and has over one billion dollars in annual revenue. I was very fortunate to get this chance as an undergraduate intern. The meetings exposed me to perspectives I could not have heard elsewhere, such as Bering Straits Corporation CEO Gail Schubert’s assertion that...
in the event of an offshore Arctic drilling spill that gets into the narrow strait, the villages in her area are “done” culturally and economically. My proposal was presented at the ICC executive council meeting, attended by Inuit leaders from Russia, Canada, and Greenland as well as Alaska, that I was able attend at the end of August, in Bethel, a tundra town with no road access. That was quite a surreal experience to wrap up my time in the North.

My internship taught me a great deal about leadership. I learned directly from my coworkers, including Jimmy Stotts. He taught me how to bring my ideas forward without seeming pushy by involving others and sharing credit for successes, and that “you never get what you deserve, only what you negotiate,” among countless other lessons. In meetings at Inuit corporations, I learned of the importance of working with other organizations, even those who might seem to be enemies, such as the Arctic Slope Corporation’s involvement with oil development companies. Finally, I learned from many leaders of nonprofits that leadership can mean a career of endless work against better-funded, more politically connected opponents, with little tangible gain, but still be extremely rewarding and important to society.

My Alaskan experience outside of the internship was just as valuable to my development. Alaska is often forgotten in the lower 48 states, and when discussed it is often thought of as the end of the road, a repository for loners who want to escape society. On the contrary, I found that Alaskans are unbelievably welcoming people with a strong sense of community. In a practice that probably comes from Inuit culture, Alaskans love to share food. I regularly found myself savoring freshly caught wild salmon or succulent raspberries brought over by a neighbor. I was constantly amazed by this generosity, but everyone was confused by my effusive gratitude. For Alaskans, it’s just a normal part of life to catch thirty salmon on a Saturday, eating a couple that night, throwing some in the freezer, and distributing the rest to friends, relatives, neighbors, and even strangers; I was once handed a barbecued salmon fillet while strolling through a downtown park. In addition to their generosity, I was impressed by the adventurous nature of Alaskans, who all seem to have a story about the time they narrowly escaped an encounter with an angry moose while backcountry climbing, or the time they moved to Hawaii to surf but missed Alaska too much to stay long.

Another central element of my time in Alaska was the land. At first I wasn’t sure why so many Inuit continue to live in tiny, isolated villages on the tundra, where winters bring months without the sun. Although as an outsider I’ll never be able to fully understand the Inuit connection to their lands, I began why they have such respect for the Alaskan environment. It is truly indescribable; words like vast, spectacular, unique, and pristine convey some of the qualities of the land but do not do it justice. While hiking massive scree ridges in Denali, swimming in impossibly blue glacial lakes in the Chugach mountains near Anchorage, and watching the salmon run in their millions up ice-colored rivers on the Kenai Peninsula, I perhaps saw the world as it was long before my birth: not untouched by humans, but used lightly enough to absorb the impact and retain its full majesty. I count myself extremely lucky to have experienced this true nature, which few people ever get the chance to see and feel.

Reflecting on my time in Alaska, I can only say that I was given much. I tried to take advantage of every second I was there, and I gained a great deal of personal development from the experience. I cannot recommend working in Alaska, and with ICC, enough, and I hope that the relationship between Michigan and ICC can continue forever. In a university where many students want to work and study abroad, too many forget that our own country has areas which are truly different, culturally and physically. To those who gave me this opportunity, I say, in Inupiaq, Yup’ik, and English: Quyanaqpak! Quyana! Thank you very much!