From Paris to Chicago: a tale from an IBEPer (*)

With a flight connection in New York, I arrived at O’Hare from Paris on an early morning of January 2nd. Reading a careful and detailed instruction from Dirk, a GSB ’03 from whom I sublet an apartment and who was still on holiday in Europe, I found my way to take the CTA to downtown. The city was still sleepy after the New Year’s celebrations with only a few riders taking the blue line train. At Clark/Lake station, I stepped out with my luggage and discovered the city I’d pictured amid a windy January month: a backdrop of skyscrapers behind a cold misty veil.

With relatives and friends living on both coasts, I have visited the US on several occasions but coming to the Midwest was my first time. I did not know anybody in Chicago other than Dirk with whom I had exchanged a couple of e-mails and phone calls. It was also the first time that I rented an apartment for 3 months without any prior visit. I did not even have the key of the apartment on me and needed to check with the doorman!

What had pushed me into this “adventure”?

It is true that I had rather planned to go on exchange to China. First, because I have some Indo-Chinese origin and real interests on Asia, and the “middle kingdom” is clearly a place to be today. In addition, I had started to learn Mandarin during one year at HEC Paris which also had (and still has) partnerships with leading business schools in Beijing, Shanghai or Hong Kong. But the academic reputation of GSB helped me change my mind and opt for Chicago.

I still remember my first day at GSB as though it was yesterday. The first morning class discussion the following day turned out to be quite challenging as I learned on that day that participation was critical to the success of completing the course with a passing grade. Unlike the business schools in Europe where majority of the students come from abroad, 85% at HEC for instance, and class participation is less important, essentially for cultural reasons, I had the opportunity at Chicago to interact in an environment mainly composed of native speakers.

The first orientation session with the Office of International Programs enabled me to make acquaintance with my 14 other fellow IBEPers from 4 continents (Africa, Asia, Australia and Europe) and to receive clear and precious information about on and off campus life. I also discovered the GSB building in Hyde Park and was highly impressed by its modern architecture and facilities.

Everything followed on from there, just as in a tale. I was rapidly involved in cases, projects and homework, intensively prepared with diverse team mates in a very good spirit of challenge and acceptance of ideas. Every week, dynamic student clubs and associations constantly proposed different activities and I had for example the opportunity to lunch and learn more about many industry sectors or functions (energy, real estate, global HR at McDonalds,…), to participate in skill improvement workshops (time management and speed reading), to watch a nice Japanese comedy (Water boys) with the Japanese group, to lunch and practice French with the French group, or to take a salsa lesson at the neighbor school of social service administration. Besides, a memorable IBEP bowling party before the mid-terms revealed other talents and aspects of my international fellows.
Outstanding conferences with business leaders or distinguished economists and professors (such as Myron Scholes) were regularly organized in Hyde Park center. Moreover, I also attended numerous interesting roundtables in downtown Gleacher center on various topics (innovation, consulting, international) and met with alumni and professionals. Besides, I enjoyed very much weekly LPF parties with excellent food and great people and the Superbowl party organized by the marketing group.

As a tourist, I also visited the Hancock Tower, the Navy Pier and numerous museums in Chicago (The Art Institute, The Field Museum, The Museum of Science and Industry, the Aquarium,…), the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, China Town (with the Phoenix restaurant and its famous dim sum). I still remember the Chinese New Year festival at the international house, jazz concerts in various theatres, bars (and even in a Presbyterian Church on Michigan avenue!), long discussions on cultural differences with friends from around the world and many other good memories that each of us, IBEPer, will carry in our mind for a long time.

Writing to you from Paris today, I am missing the Metra train or the bus N°6 that regularly took me from downtown to campus, the cafeteria at Hyde Park center (with its Delhi menus) or at the Divinity School (with various vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes), and more generally the great atmosphere at GSB.

Retrospectively, I would recommend an exchange experience to any MBA student, especially in a context of today’s global economy. Putting yourself out of your comfort zone allows you to learn more about yourself and to have the necessary confidence to adjust yourself into any situation of change in the future. Discovering a new academic environment, learning a new culture, making new friends, broadening your horizons and developing your international perspectives are just some of the additional benefits from such an experience.

Finally, I would like to simply thank GSB staff, faculty and students for allowing us to be fully part of the community during this Winter term and to live a memorable experience in Chicago. See you soon in Paris, or elsewhere…

(*) Liem Nguyen was a Winter 2006 exchange student from the MBA program of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales (HEC) Paris, a 125-year-old Business School in France, one of the 33 partners of the University of Chicago GSB within the International Business Exchange Program (IBEP).

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