

Vy Nguyen, Social Sciences Stage 3

Fall Exchange at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

I had the privilege of studying at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for the fall semester of my third year. Beyond being an opportunity to explore a new culture, this exchange held personal significance for me. UNC, one of the leading public universities in the world, is renowned for its academic excellence, and I, always up for challenges, saw it as a chance to broaden my horizon. Having finished 1.5 years of high school outside of the US due to the COVID pandemic, this exchange felt like a chance to seek closure with my US journey that had been disrupted four years ago.



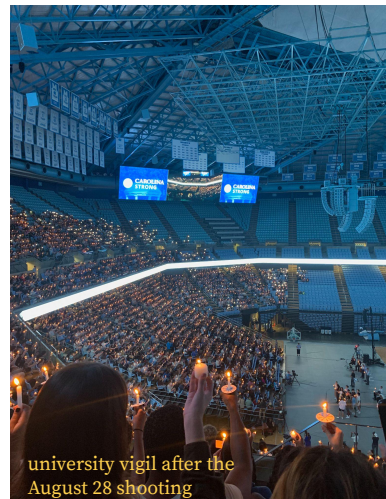
The American education system provided a refreshing contrast to the Irish system. For example, students registered for classes a semester ahead, and on top of that, my UCD modules were not listed in UNC's records. As such, I had to reach out to professors individually to secure spots in classes I wanted. In addition, the frequent assignments meant less stressful exams but more pressure on attendance and smaller assignments. Regardless, I transitioned well and excelled in smaller class sizes, actively participating in discussions and fostering meaningful interactions with my professors and classmates.

Two standout modules, Industrial Organization and Health Economics, not only fueled my passion for economics but also helped me define future career paths. With the support of my professors at UNC and academic mentors at the Ad Astra Academy, I secured a Communications internship at the Health Information and Quality Authority in Ireland. This opportunity aligns with my interest in health economics and offers comprehensive insights into Irish and European healthcare systems which I am very excited about.

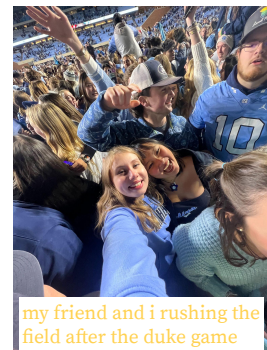


My exchange was not without its share of challenges, including seeking a sense of community. Limited events for exchange students prompted me to attend numerous society events to extend my connection, leading me to some of the kindest, most talented people I have ever known in my short three months here, exchange and degree-seeking students alike. Their interesting perspectives and diverse backgrounds added tremendously to my learning experience in North Carolina.

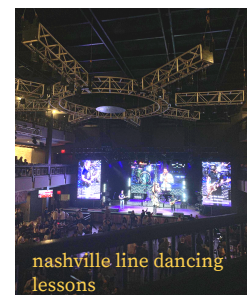
Two consecutive gun-related incidents on campus in the semester's first month left a lasting impact. The emotional toll, coupled with a heightened awareness of my surroundings, became my daily life. I found myself never able to return to my lockdown hideouts and my friends withdrew from modules taking place near shooting sites. Yet, the sense of community, the support from professors, and the resilience of fellow students helped us collectively cope and rebuild a semblance of normalcy. My professors extended assignment deadlines and cried with students in class in healing, classmates shared notes with those absent, and even my UCD Global coordinator offered me alternative ways to finish the semester just in case.



Embracing the vibrant campus culture, especially the prominent school spirit, became a highlight of my exchange. Some of my favorite memories at UNC are spent at football games – adorning Carolina blue merch and waving pompoms every touchdown, yelling the chants and swag-surfing, hosting tailgates and rushing the field. Despite the lottery ticket system limiting student attendance, every game welcomed a full house of fifty thousand enthusiastic fans, myself proudly one.



The frequent breaks and a combination of ultra-cheap airlines and fourteen-hour bus rides allowed me to explore various parts of the US, enriching my cultural experience and expanding my travel skills. Spontaneous trains to concerts in Charlotte, fall breaks by the beach in Orlando, a Friendsgiving dinner in hotel rooms, cafe hopping in Raleigh, each journey became an opportunity to turn American culture into something uniquely our own.



I extend my gratitude to the UCD Global staff for guiding my application process and for their immense support after the shootings. The Academy's bursary has made this unimaginably transformative exchange possible. My academic mentors supported me with class selection, internship application, and workshop referrals. Returning to Dublin, I carry a newfound assurance and a wealth of experiences that I am eager to apply to my internship and upcoming fourth year at UCD.