During the Fall Semester of my fourth year, I was on exchange at l'Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL), in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. Because the school year in Europe is only two semesters during a period of 10 months, my exchange lasted from September 2015 into January 2016, causing me to return a week into my Spring Semester back at SFU. Although I am a biophysics student, I went on exchange primarily to practice my French language skills. I ended up taking primarily elective courses at UCL, which is a labeled as a political science school. I wanted to go to a French-speaking country so that I could fully immerse myself in the language. Having been to Paris in grade eleven, I thought this was a perfect opportunity to experience another country. I was attracted to Belgium as an option because of its vast multiculturalism and its central location from which I could visit other parts of Europe. Belgium essentially has two regions. There is the Flemish (very similar to Dutch) region in the north, and a French region in the south, where I was living. It is worth noting that there is also a small German region, and that German is the third of the three official languages.
During the summer before my exchange, I was working full time as a swim coach. This meant I had to carefully budget my time in order to properly prepare for the exchange. Planning a trip like this requires you to prioritize differently than usual, and – in hindsight – I wish I had begun preparations earlier. Having already been to France, I thought its neighbours would have similar procedures. However, Belgium can be a very bureaucratic country, and along with its multiculturalism comes a multitude of different procedures and organizations that you must work through in order to get official documentation. I would recommend obtaining a student VISA early; I waited too long before applying for mine, and it caused problems. This was further complicated because the Belgian Canadian Embassy is located in Montreal, so time changes and potential language barriers must be considered. Thankfully, everything worked out. I also wish I would have allotted more time to find housing. Although residence on campus is fairly available, an early application is a good idea. Also, because a deposit is needed, you will need to figure out how you plan on doing your banking (i.e. direct deposit from a Canadian bank or opening a bank account in Belgium). Prior to starting my semester, I was lucky that I chose to do a language course in Belgium with a private company called CLL, which was recommended through the school (and which I would recommend as well). During the first couple weeks in Belgium for the language course, I was able to get my residence housing sorted out while living with a host parent that I found through CLL.

In preparation for departure to Belgium, I was not sure which aspects of my plans were most important. As mentioned, I wish I had begun the VISA application earlier on. Instead, I was mostly preoccupied by what I was bringing with me, even though this is something that can be planned just prior to departure. I chose not to bring many school supplies because I knew they could be easily bought after arrival. I was happy with my decision, with the exception of extra electronic devices for school. I had planned on purchasing a USB stick and an external hard drive, but I found that electronics were much more expensive in Europe and I therefore went without them. Other than for those items, the pricing was not much different from in Vancouver. Even though I traveled when the Canadian dollar was 75 cents to the euro, the cost of everyday things like groceries were priced low enough so
that my living expenses were about that as in Vancouver. It is a cash-based society, so one should expect to pay some bank fees when taking out money. Even though I would have saved a bit of money by opening a bank account in Belgium (despite those bank fees), I decided not to bother with it as I had already paid my residence fees prior to arriving. Instead, I just withdrew fairly large sums at a time to dodge the bank fees.

Although budget was easy to calculate for my time in Louvain-la-Neuve, I did not account for the expensiveness of travel. I choose to do a lot of travelling on weekends when the university was fairly quiet. It only takes about three hours to drive across the whole country, so many Belgian students who live at the school return home on weekends. This fact makes for an interesting week full of partying and a mostly quiet weekend. Because of my central European location, I was able to travel fairly cheaply by train, by bus, or by airlines like Ryanair. My travels included visits to Germany, France, Italy, The Netherlands, Ireland, Britain, and throughout Belgium. I mostly used Google Maps to plan my transportation, and Hostelworld to find cheap places to stay.

To begin my exchange, I flew from Vancouver to Brussels with Icelandair then took a train to Louvain-la-Neuve. I found the train system in Belgium to be efficient and cheap. As a student, I was able to capitalize on a few deals mostly oriented for the students to return home on weekends. In other words, cheaper fares were available for consistent travel. Once arrived at the train station in Louvain-la-Neuve, my host parent for CLL picked me up. I was able to orient myself nicely during this three-week course since my host parent’s home was located just a short walk away from anywhere I wanted to go on campus. This ended up being good because the orientation offered by the university was rather short and not overly helpful.
Once my language course ended I moved into my residence on campus, which they call a kot. These kots are essentially apartment buildings with four to six person floors. I lived on an all-male floor with two Belgians, a Brazilian, and an Italian. It seemed quite normal to be living with a mix of exchange students and local students, which I really appreciated. Living with two local students allowed me a chance to make friends who knew the area and the culture, providing me with a much better orientation than any organized program could have. I was really grateful to have Belgians showing me the local nightlife while giving me an opportunity to practice my French. In Belgium, it is common for universities to have a group of bars and clubs run by students that are frequented during the week. In addition, an event called 24 Heures Vélo takes place in Louvain-la-Neuve. Second only to Oktoberfest in terms of beer consumption, this event is known Europe-wide.

In terms of school, the professors are forgiving with how much work is assigned. I found that lecture hours were also slightly less than I was used to in Canada. This could have in part been because I was taking mostly elective courses and French language courses. Each faculty at UCL is run as a completely separate entity, which makes signing up for courses slightly confusing. I wish I had made more appointments with my advisor in the beginning of the semester to make sure I got the courses I wanted, since she worked very limited hours. Because the faculties were so separate, the feel of each course was very different. This gives you variety, but also inconsistency in your workload amongst your courses. For example, my French courses (which were only really taken by exchange students) were assignment based, my cultural studies course was based 100% on the final exam, and my biochemistry course was 60% final exam and 40% presentation (which I did with a Belgian local student). Because the semester is five months long, students take courses until the end of December, have a break over Christmas, and return in January for exams. Something I wish I would have known is how easy it would have been to write my exams early. I had planned my course load so that all my exams

On the left, a view from my balcony on residence and on the right, one of the seven stages with DJs at 24 Heures Vélo
were in the first week of January, which meant I could write them ‘as scheduled’ and return home for the second week of classes at SFU. However, because there are so many exchange students in Belgium, it is relatively easy to write your exams at the end of December in order to return home in time for the new semester.

Through my CLL and university language courses I was able to easily make friends who also wanted to travel. This allowed me to experience life in Louvain-la-Neuve during the week and have some regular travel to the city of Brussels on the weekends. Though I really enjoyed Brussels, there is not a ton to do there in terms of sightseeing. After my initial couple days of sightseeing, my friends and I mostly went to Brussels for a change of scenery, since Louvain-la-Neuve is such a small university town. I really enjoy tasting different beers, so Brussels’ world-famous bar Delirium Café (which has over 3000 different beers) was one of my favorite places to visit. There is also an absinthe bar across the street from Delirium called Floris Bar that is cool to visit if you feel like something different than beer. The way you can find so many different parts of Europe in one city was the coolest thing about Brussels. Another example of this multiculturalism is all the places to get macarons, typical French deserts. Because Belgium is such a multicultural country, it is not surprising that the capitol, Brussels, is a French city located in the Flemish region of the country, and has a lot to offer.

The main courtyard downtown Brussels
I really enjoyed the multiculturalism in Belgium, and the way it differs from that of Canada. There is a bit less mixing of cultures in Belgium, especially because the Flemish and French regions are separated by a definite border. I struggled a bit with their bureaucratic system and all the paperwork. A policeman even had to come to my residence on campus to make sure I was living there just so I could sign a form. Despite the frustration, the experience taught me how to manage official paperwork much better. I also learned what I missed most and took for granted about Canadian culture, something I am now even more proud of. I also was able to take away vast improvements to my French language skills, and satisfy some of my desires to travel.

There are many more things that I took away from my exchange, mostly just from my everyday interactions with a completely new host of friends. It is a unique and rewarding experience to live in a country where you know no one and get to make new friends from all over the world. I am not sure what other experience would have allowed me to gain this amount of perspective and self-knowledge in such a short amount of time and at such an influential period in my life. I do know that an exchange is a fairly accessible way to make these kinds of discoveries, and – because of the nature of them – they are experiences that will be unique to each and every person.