

Lee Huoy Fen

2025 Fulbright Distinguished Award in Teaching for International Teachers

When the World Becomes a Classroom:

Rethinking Success and What Truly Matters



All 20 of us on the Fulbright Program at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Three planes and nearly 30 hours of travel brought me to the quiet embrace of Indiana, Pennsylvania. There, I began a four-month immersion alongside 19 other Fulbright teachers from 13 different countries at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP).

In these four months, the world became my classroom. Learning happened in schools, communities, conversations, shared meals, and moments of reflection. I began to rethink success not merely as rankings, or outcomes, but as the cultivation of resilient, purposeful, and connected lives. What truly matters, I realised, is how education empowers individuals to find dignity, belonging, and the courage to contribute meaningfully to the world.



Where the 20 of us gathered weekly, seated United Nations-style, for discussions and seminars.

In the sections that follow, I share how this immersion reshaped my understanding of education and, in my humble view, what it truly means to succeed.

Learning Across Contexts: Field Experiences in Diversity and Inclusion

Visiting schools across southwestern Pennsylvania, alongside learning about education systems from around the world, reinforced my understanding of how deeply learning is shaped by context. Our field experiences in two contrasting school districts, one rural and one urban, sharpened my understanding of educational diversity in the United States.

The Indiana Area School District serves students from predominantly white, close-knit communities. During our visit to the Indiana County Technology Center and the River Valley STEAM Academy, we observed high school students

dividing their school day between academic courses at their high schools and hands-on training in trades such as welding, masonry, and automobile repair. Clearly presented



A student honing her welding skills for a professional career in welding; career guidance displayed prominently in school.

to diverse paths forward.

In contrast, Brashear High School in Pittsburgh serves a highly diverse and predominantly economically disadvantaged student population. Students pass through metal detectors at the school entrances each morning to enhance school safety. Here,



Sports play a significant role in U.S. school culture; football games often create the ultimate stage for pride and unity.

career pathways and job prospects throughout the school help students set practical and well-defined goals. It warmed my heart to witness the students' quiet resolve as I spoke to some of them. Many of them proudly charted courses toward steady, well-paying jobs right after graduation, prioritising family support over the default college track, a refreshing nod

teachers support many immigrant students, some of whom speak little or no English, while navigating complex academic, social, and emotional needs within their student population.

Learning about Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and inclusive practices at IUP and in local schools was also illuminating. We observed wide-ranging support roles (paraeducators, behavioural health therapists, and speech therapists) working



With our instructors for the Fulbright Technology Workshop during which we learnt much about Universal Design for Learning, as well as the applications of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Standards.

closely with the students alongside the teachers. Each role varies in responsibility, enabling schools to address diverse student needs effectively. Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) are mandated legally and provide tailored goals and strategies for students with specific learning needs. Thoughtful design of learning spaces, guided by UDL principles, ensures accessibility and engagement for every child. These observations deepened my appreciation for collaborative, student-centred support structures, inspiring me to weave similar inclusive strategies into my classroom back at home.

Listening to fellow Fulbright teachers' stories—some teaching classes of up to 200 students or working in communities shaped by poverty and marginalisation—further deepened my gratitude for Singapore's system and strengthened my commitment to



Sharing our education systems with the student teachers at IUP.

recognise potential where others might see limitation.

Nurturing Student Agency & Joyful Learning

Beyond systems and structures, I also witnessed how success is quietly nurtured through the everyday craft of teaching, in classrooms that honour curiosity, creativity, and student voice.

Soft music filled the air. Laughter bounced off walls lined with students' work. Here, I met teachers who did not just teach, they wove students' worlds into their lessons. One class worked to Taylor Swift's latest album, turning the room into a cheerful hum of focus. Halloween pumpkins and Thanksgiving turkeys sneaked into mathematics word problems, making the sums feel like stories from life itself. These moments were not top-down initiatives, but organic expressions



Halloween and fall-themed student work displayed along the corridor.



Indiana Junior High School students examining the growth of their sunflower plants in the school garden.

of teachers' passion that made learning joyful and relevant.

One teacher's passion project—a flourishing school garden—left an impression on me. What began as a hobby had blossomed into a living classroom during his summer break, built on his own time and expense. A DIY plant trellis was fashioned from an old trampoline his daughter had outgrown, and the garden is thriving on horse manure compost from her workplace. His students tended to the garden enthusiastically alongside him, unafraid to get their hands dirty. I watched them taste raw vegetables straight from the earth and was touched when they eagerly gifted me their precious harvest: sunflower seeds, tomatoes, and chili peppers, to take home. This garden embodied teaching itself: helping students grow through loving care, fresh ideas, and the creative use of limited resources.



My wonderful partner teachers—who have become my dear friends: Mrs. Michele Rosborough from Pittsburgh Brookline PreK-8 School (left) and Mrs. Carolyn Detweiler from Eisenhower Elementary School in Indiana (right).

In another classroom, students designed thermal cups for a café, blending science with entrepreneurship. Through testing materials, managing budgets, and pitching ideas, they learned physics, finance, and collaboration simultaneously.

These experiences reshaped my understanding of achievement. When learning is rooted in passion and relevance, success becomes less about examination scores and more about growth, agency, collaboration, and joy. I left inspired to explore collaborating with colleagues on such projects, where success can bloom through passion-driven initiatives and by redefining achievement to include creative and authentic problem-solving, not merely performance in written examinations.

Even as I learned from others, I was reminded that teaching is deeply reciprocal. In sharing Singapore's culture and education system, I became a cultural ambassador—introducing songs, dances, crafts, and glimpses of primary school life in Singapore. Handwritten letters exchanged between my class in Singapore and one at Eisenhower Elementary School seeded connections that I hope will turn into lasting friendships.

International Unity Day, an annual event at IUP, was especially memorable. We shared Singapore through pictures, food, toys, and stories, giving our schoolmates and the Indiana community a glimpse into our culture.



Cultural sharing on Singapore with the first-grade students at Pittsburgh Brookline PreK-8 School.



We set up booths on several occasions to share about Singapore with students across various schools and at IUP.



I was also invited by my faculty advisor and audit course professor to present on Singapore's education system to classes of student teachers at IUP.

For me, these experiences were more than just opportunities to share about Singapore. Seeing the curiosity and excitement in others' eyes, receiving thoughtful questions, and exchanging ideas reminded me that understanding grows not through explanation alone, but through empathy, curiosity, and shared human connection.

Community and Culture: Where Everyone Knows Everyone



Bonding over games and cheers at the stadium where we joined the freshmen for their orientation fun.

My first impressions of Indiana and IUP were overwhelmingly positive. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Petrucci and her team for their thoughtful care, the kindness of my friendship families, and the warm welcome from the local community. These left a deep impression on me, reminding me how thoughtfulness, care, and kindness can quietly ripple outward.

It was refreshing to experience varsity life in the U.S. as we took part in yard games and IUP's 150th anniversary celebrations. I also enjoyed attending an American football game, Halloween parties, Thanksgiving festivities, and collecting what seems like an endless supply of free T-shirts, these are fun parts of U.S. university culture! I am grateful for this truly American experience; one I would not have had if I had only come here for tourism.



The community coming together at the Halloween Trunk or Treat. 🎃

In the four months I lived there, this small town truly felt like home. Community was not just an idea, but something people actively practiced. In the rhythms of small-town life, I encountered lessons about generosity and shared responsibility.

One family partnered with a local restaurant to create an opportunity for their daughter to perform—an event that brought people together while raising funds for the school's hockey team. A Halloween Trunk or

Treat event became more than just a festive event—it brought schools, businesses, and families together in a spirit of connection and celebration. The high school band found a platform for the students to perform, young children collected treats in a safe and lively setting, and local businesses joined in the fun while building relationships and growing their community presence.

That same warmth and openness defined our time with our friendship families, who welcomed us with homemade bakes, took us on long drives out of town for a change of scenery, and candid conversations about faith, hardships, and family stories. Through these interactions, I was reminded to stay grounded in purpose and gratitude, and to remain resilient through the different seasons in life.



A fun afternoon of pumpkin carving and roasting seeds with our friendship families.

Joining in a geocaching trail for the America250 was so much fun and it also gave me a glimpse of how the community treasures its history and traditions. It was especially

meaningful to learn about the planning behind the trail and the effort that goes into creating the accompanying memorabilia. The project was the brainchild of a retired professor, who remains remarkably active in the community despite his age, a reminder that passion and commitment are not limited by age.



Exploring Indiana County's history through geocaching in celebration of America 250.

From bustling community events to intimate family gatherings, the spirit of this small town lingered at every moment, tangible and unforgettable. The generosity of the friends that I made also reminded me that giving flows not from an abundance of wealth, but from an abundance of spirit, the belief that there is always enough to share. These moments challenged the achievement-driven definitions of success I had grown accustomed to, replacing them with a quieter measure: belonging, generosity, and shared purpose.

Purpose in the Pause: Living Intentionally



Running for a worthy cause at an IUP event.

Being in the U.S. also compelled me to slow down. With buses arriving only once an hour, limited Uber rides, and the nearest supermarket miles away, I learned to live intentionally, planning weekly errands, factoring in more travel time because walking was often the best way to get around, making time to exercise and to become

more observant of what was around me. What once felt inconvenient soon became an exercise in mindful living, teaching me patience.

Building and making connections requires courage, especially for the introvert in me. I became more accustomed to taking the leap to start up a conversation, to speak up more readily during group discussions to share my views, and to engage more fully in communal experiences.

With those efforts to make connections, I have gained so much in perspectives. I had the privilege of meeting people whose lives overflowed with purpose and passion beyond what they did for a living. A coffee barista, who transformed thrifted clothing into sustainable fashion, launching a business and building an online presence to share positive vibes. A retired mathematics professor built his dream treehouse by hand, carefully minimising its impact on nature, each plank a testament to his creativity and perseverance. A father devoted his time outside work to strengthening family bonds, scheduling seasonal adventures that brought him and his wife closer to their children—from



Joining a gardening special interest group at the Indiana Community Garden to harvest apples and make fresh apple cider.



Relaxing on the pontoon in Yellow Creek, soaking in the warmth of the summer sun.



Observing the pageantry of IUP's Homecoming Parade, featuring floats, bands, and Crimson Hawk pride along Philadelphia Street.

summer afternoons fishing at Yellow Creek, to hunting trips for rabbits, squirrels, and deer in the woods during fall.

Interacting with people from diverse nationalities and backgrounds reminded me to listen carefully and appreciate different perspectives and experiences. Each small step, a question asked, a story shared, a new viewpoint considered, these deepened my understanding of *ikigai*: that meaningful growth and fulfilment come from living with intention, passion, presence, and connections.

Generosity and Connection: The Heart of a Meaningful Life

Spontaneous gatherings in the Fulbright communal room forged bonds that transcended borders. We hosted impromptu celebrations, sharing the richness of our cultures through food, stories, and games. We learnt about Mexico's Day of the Dead, laughed as we swung at piñatas, sipped Moroccan tea brewed in the traditional way, sang karaoke led by our Filipino friends, and delighted in food parties featuring dishes from our hometowns. We explored places together, from local parks to New York City and Niagara Falls. These were not formal presentations, they were genuine exchanges of laughter, stories, and culture that made 20 strangers feel like family.

Though our education systems differ and our national contexts are distinct, we are united by a shared purpose: to nurture, inspire, and care for our students.



A cultural exchange as we learn about Mexico's Day of the Dead from our Mexican colleague.



Finding joy in small moments: sledding down the hill at College Lodge with friends.

From my peers from 13 countries, I learned what it means to teach with resilience and adaptability. Stories of nomadic teaching lives and service-driven sacrifices reframed my understanding of commitment and resilience.

These exchanges deepened my reflection on Singapore's journey in education: a system shaped by necessity and resilience in a nation with few natural resources, where our people have become our most valuable asset. As we strive for excellence and global competitiveness, I also reflected on how we might nurture and protect joy, well-being, and purpose in our students' lives.

When the world becomes a classroom, I learn that the heart of education is the heart of humanity. Through my experiences, I have come to appreciate more deeply that true success is not measured by what we achieve alone, but by the support we offer, the joy we share, and the communities we nurture by uplifting others. A life grounded in generosity and connection is a life of purpose and meaning. These are the values I will carry forward from my Fulbright experience—as a learner, an educator, and a leader.



Fulbright Distinguished Award for International teachers: Class of 2025 at IUP