Development

Global Citizenship through Study Abroad
By Cindy Fan

An education that fosters global proficiency is no longer a luxury but a necessity. It is the university’s responsibility to ensure that international education is part and parcel of every student’s college experience.

“Please, Professor Fan, take us to the UCLA Store, please,” a student asked me at the end of a long day of field trip. She was not referring to the UCLA Store in Westwood. Rather, she wanted to visit a UCLA Store in Beijing, and her request was soon echoed by other students on the bus, including those waking up from naps. How could I refuse? I asked the bus-driver to take us to an upscale mall, where we found a UCLA Store that not only sold UCLA merchandise but posted an elaborate timeline beginning in 1919, when UCLA was founded, on the wall. At the risk of drawing attention, the more than 30 of us couldn’t resist but do the “8 Clap” – UCLA’s more famous cheer – there, in a mall in Beijing!

Besides being proud of being a Bruin (nickname for members of UCLA), my students were experiencing the globalization of China first-hand by seeing not only McDonalds and Starbucks everywhere but also UCLA merchandise being sold. Globalization was indeed the theme of the summer Travel Study program that I taught, but what gratified me most was witnessing my students’ metamorphosis as they navigated unfamiliar soil and reflected upon it.

At the Dandelion Migrant Children School, about 90 minutes from central Beijing by bus, my students were offered an opportunity to teach English lessons to children who could not go to local schools because of their rural background. It was hot and humid, and there was no air-conditioning. There, I observed my students being transformed instantly into heat-proofed, enthusiastic teachers singing The Hokey Pokey and playing games in the unpaved yard. I thought to myself: “They look different from when they are sitting in UCLA classrooms listening to lectures!”

What also struck me was how my students reflected upon their volunteering experience. Political Science student Belem Lamas wrote in her field trip paper: “After lunch time … two lines formed around sinks while 30 students washed their dishes. I was amazed by the discipline and the class etiquette… The experience at Dandelion helped me reflect on how privileged American children are to have free public education … meanwhile many students in China strive to become educated citizens. Chinese children work very hard and have a lot of weight on their shoulders since many are the last hope for their family to be better off.”

An education that fosters global proficiency is no longer a luxury but a necessity. It is the university’s responsibility to ensure that international education is part and parcel of every student’s college experience.
Global citizenship with multiple skills

The notion of global citizenship is not new, nor is the expectation that universities cultivate global citizens. In an increasingly globalized world where problems as well as problem-solving extend from the local to the global, the definition of global citizens must highlight intercultural competency, commitment, and contribution. Based on Sheila Biddle’s (2002) study of internationalization, I define a global citizen as someone who has

- the literacy, consciousness, and a critical understanding of how national and international issues intersect;
- an awareness of their role in an interdependent world and how they can contribute to, shape and improve it;
- a capacity and commitment, backed by research and experience, to solve problems as members of a global society; and
- humility about one’s own biases.

Study abroad, be it a weeks-long, months-long or year-long experience, is one of the most effective means to grow the above four qualities.

I opened my first lecture of my Travel Study program by highlighting the five skills I expected of the students: Flexible; Inquisitive; Entertained; Learning from others; and Disciplined (FIELD). Any foreign country is a “field” where students can practice the above skills. Being flexible about logistics, weather, food, and living conditions, is a marker of maturity and the capacity to meet challenges outside one’s comfort zone. A maximum-force typhoon (rated 10 out of a maximum 10) – something that never happens in California – in Hong Kong had one of my students stranded at a subway station for hours, but with the help of a local resident she eventually made it back to the hotel. Being in the field also means that there are plenty of opportunities to be inquisitive, through observations and asking questions, at museums, exhibition halls, universities, science parks, and even restaurants.

There are plenty of entertaining moments when studying abroad, but entertainment can also be thoughtful and grounded, such as making dumplings together with local Chinese students. Learning from others – foreign professors, students, and even bus-drivers – is an enabling and humbling experience, one that is difficult to have without physically being there. Finally, study abroad demands discipline, such as punctuality, healthy living, good organization and use of time, and a sense of community and collaboration. My students learned quickly who among the group tended to oversleep and accordingly they coordinated about wake-up calls among one another.

In and outside the classroom, study abroad offers opportunities for assumptions to be questioned and stereotypes to be challenged, especially through interactions with people who live locally. During a visit to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, we heard from U.S. government officers their concerns about the lack of political reform in China. Somewhat surprisingly, similar criticisms were the very theme of a guest lecture by a well-known Chinese professor, which to some of my students helped to dispel the myth that Chinese citizens are afraid to speak out.

My students shone as ambassadors of UCLA. In a radio show “From University to the World” at China Radio International, four students of my Travel Study program spoke with confidence, originality, and optimism. Their counterparts – four students at China’s Renmin University – did equally well. They exchanged opinions about U.S.-China relations, outlook about their career prospects and life aspirations, in front of a live audience and being broadcasted around the world. Such experience and interaction is not only memorable but a source of pride for the students, their parents, and their universities.

Educational and career impacts of study abroad

Research has shown that students who have had study-abroad experience outperform those who have not had such experience (Lee et al. 2012). Such experience may even shape future educational plans and
broaden career choices. At a student-organized Chinese New Year celebration at UCLA, Andrew Cajas, a Latino student who grew up in East Los Angeles and majored in East Asian Studies, appeared on the stage of a packed ballroom and sang a song in fluent Mandarin. Later that year, he appeared on a popular Chinese TV show “Bridge” where non-native and non-heritage speakers of Mandarin competed in their mastery of Chinese language and culture. Andrew was placed fifth out of 120 contestants and as a result was awarded a three-year fellowship to study in China.

After completing the Travel Study program in China, and having traveled to Beijing and Shanghai, UCLA International Development Studies student Wendy Chan wrote: “Prior to these experiences, my career goals were heavily oriented around the domestic arena. However, through my many conversations with Professor Fan during office hours (and sometimes even dinner), I saw how the fundamental changes in Chinese society are occurring at a faster rate than the law. I further realized that international law plays a large role in protecting the rights and freedoms of the Chinese populations who have been marginalized by globalization. As a result, I am currently pursuing a degree in the law so that I may actively engage in shaping the effects of the relationship between the United States and China.”

Student testimonies from a survey of University of California Education Abroad Program (UCEAP) students in the United Kingdom further show that the impacts of study abroad are long-lasting and transnational:

“I achieved a sense of independence I had never experienced before while studying and traveling abroad ... I treasure my year abroad through UCLA’s EAP to this day.” (1966-67 participant)

“It helped nurture and sustain what is now a lifelong love of learning.” (1975-76 participant)

“Living abroad really cultivated an international mindset. Immediately after my year abroad I set up an internship in China over the summer to gain international perspectives as someone in the working world.” (2009-10 participant)

Global student mobility

According to data released by the Institute of International Education (IIE), the total number of international students globally will reach 8 million in 2025, representing ten-fold the number in 1975. While the number of U.S. students studying abroad for credit has more than tripled over the past two decades, to 304,467 in 2013-2014, their destination choices remain quite concentrated, with Western European countries being the most popular. The number of U.S. students studying in China was merely 13,763 in 2013-2014 and actually declined by 4.5% from the year before. In contrast, in 2014-2015 more than 300,000 students from China studied in the U.S., representing a 10.8% increase from the previous year.

UCLA has sent thousands of students overseas through UCEAP that has over 250 options in 35 countries. In addition, UCLA’s Summer Sessions offers more than 30 different Travel Study Programs in Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, North America, and the Middle East, and the list is growing. Still, there are many more international students studying at UCLA than UCLA students studying abroad. Suffice it to say that both UCLA and most American universities have ample room to grow study-abroad opportunities and interest for their students.

As universities prepare students for leadership in the 21st century, an education that fosters global proficiency is no longer a luxury but a necessity. While not every student is able to study abroad, it is the university’s responsibility to ensure that international education — via for example classes with a global focus — is part and parcel of the college experience.