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“I’ve a Feeling We’re Not in Kansas Anymore”: Negotiating the New Landscape of Study Abroad

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The COVID-19 pandemic has wrought changes to the landscape of education abroad. This paper reviews some of the operational gaps exposed by the pandemic circumstances and then advocates for enhanced notions of communication, collaboration, and community needed to embrace change and close prior gaps. The paper concludes that developing a nuanced appreciation for the academic and personal realities of today’s students will facilitate increased access to the benefits of study abroad, thereby encouraging cross-cultural awareness and second language learning.

INTRODUCTION

We’ve grown accustomed to referring to *normal operations* in study abroad as being our practices in *the before times*, i.e., in the years leading up to February-March 2020. Now, however, nearly three years after the start of the global pandemic, we find ourselves deeply considering how study abroad can and should operate in *the after times*.

This special volume of *L2* showcases the experience of faculty colleagues whose students have been unable to advance their language skills during the pandemic through participation in traditional study abroad programs. Although I previously directed a program in Asian languages within a department of literature and languages, I am neither a linguist nor a language teacher by training. I’m a religious studies scholar whose research focuses on Chinese traditions, a career path that included extended periods of language training and field observation. After serving as a college dean in China, I had the good fortune to be hired into my current position as associate vice provost and executive director of the University of California’s systemwide Education Abroad Program (UCEAP).

UCEAP was founded in 1962 to offer educational exchange programs for students—primarily undergraduates—across the entire University of California system. The first 80 students traveled to Bordeaux, France, to study for the year. In the 60 years of its history, UCEAP has enrolled 126,468 outbound students and has brought in 42,707 reciprocity students. Today, almost all the individual UC campuses have bilateral international educational exchanges, and several offer a significant number of faculty-led programs. In *the before times*, UCEAP sent close to 6,000 students out on its programs annually; a similar number studied abroad through campus-originated programs.

My contribution to this volume is not an empirical study; rather, in view of the larger health, safety, and academic challenges that have arisen during the pandemic, I suggest some

of the steps that need to be taken if we are to traverse this new landscape of study abroad successfully. As we emerge gradually from the whirlwind of sometimes devastating changes wrought by COVID-19, we find ourselves in a different world. As with Dorothy Gale and her companions in Frank L. Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, making our way through this unfamiliar environment will require careful thought, courage, and compassion.

BACKGROUND

First, a review of the whirlwind. On March 11, 2020, as part of its struggle to contain the COVID-19 virus, the U.S. announced a 30-day ban on incoming travel from the 26 European countries; inbound travel from China had already been halted. Worried parents phoned their students abroad—often waking them in the middle of the night—to urge them to return home immediately before the travel ban took effect in less than three days' time. That the ban did not apply to U.S. citizens or permanent residents was not always understood. That many European universities were in or nearing spring break added to the problem as students' options for remaining or continuing coursework had not yet been decided. Some parents asked that their students *not* return, judging that healthcare abroad might be superior to what they might be able to access in the U.S.

It was the start of weeks of communication confusion affecting every aspect of study abroad at every level. Travel arrangements, insurance coverage, health and safety protocols, effects of citizenship status, finances and financial aid, academic credit, progress to degree—everything was thrown into disarray. Rules changed frequently and protocols were updated constantly. Student communication was often scattershot: requests for information and assistance were often sent to multiple parties simultaneously. Parents, friends, faculty, academic advisors, and study abroad staff (both abroad and in the U.S.) were inundated, resulting in multiple responses that did not always align due to timing or knowledge base.

Facing the need to bring nearly 1,000 students back to the States in short order was an enormous effort. Simultaneously, our reciprocal relations team worked with campus staff to manage the concerns of over 1,100 exchange students on the UC campuses. It's important to note that the students who were abroad were not on faculty-led programs with group travel arrangements, cohort housing, or a UC faculty or staff member accompanying them. Consistent messaging to students and among UCEAP, partner institutions, and campus partners was problematic as the situation changed constantly. Real-time global data-sharing happened through mechanisms that were devised on the fly. Along with our campus partners and our partner institutions, we scrambled to adjust procedures and policies in accordance with mandated public health and safety requirements both in the U.S. and abroad. Yet somehow, all the students who were eligible and wanted to return to the U.S. did so, and the staff endeavored to find academic alternatives for those students who could not. Addressing students' academic and financial issues took weeks for all parties involved to sort out; the outcomes were not always optimal.

In academic year (AY) 2020-21, there were only 72 UCEAP participants—primarily students who were unable to leave China or who were otherwise in-country in a location with an active UCEAP exchange agreement. A small number of students participated in virtual immersion or internship programs. In AY 2021-22, even as China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries remained closed to exchange programs, student demand resulted in a clear V-shaped recovery for UCEAP: a total of 1,763 students studied abroad. For AY 2022-23, UCEAP anticipates sending more than 3,500 students outbound.

Participation numbers are up, but so is the number of health and safety incidents. Pandemic lockdowns and social distancing seem to have combined with political antipathies and high-profile incidents of civil unrest to foster isolation and social uncertainty in students. Staff note a rise in student reports of anxiety, depression, roommate conflicts, and substance abuse. When faced with academic or personal problems, an increasing number of students find it difficult to navigate the situation. Anecdotal evidence from faculty and staff suggests that students are not availing themselves of office hours, are less inclined to visit the study center casually, and seem not to know how to ask for guidance or timely assistance. These perceived changes are concerning. One of the traditionally recognized outcomes of study abroad is the discovery of reservoirs of resiliency and creative response that students did not know they possess; such discovery is achieved when students face adversity and problem-solve their way through it.

Among the greatest and most immediate challenges students may face is the need to negotiate a second language environment. Translation apps might be useful in face-to-face situations, but can they manage sudden loudspeaker announcements of track changes in a train station? In a recent meeting of the University of California's Bordeaux Association, French language teachers affiliated with UCEAP's programs in Bordeaux reported a notable decline in newly arrived students' performance on placement exams. Pre-pandemic, most students generally scored a 3 on a scale of 1-5, with a few students scoring at level 4 or 5. However, scores for the 2021-22 academic year were lower, with more than half the students scoring only a 2. The sense from the instructors was that this was likely due to the past two years of online language learning rather than in-person instruction. These same instructors also noted students' reticence to seek them out during office hours for help during the term. All this is not to impugn the creative pedagogy and success with virtual language instruction that other authors in this issue speak to, but it suggests that many students—like many faculty members—had difficulties adjusting to a virtual medium of instruction.

Setting aside for a moment the issue of language deficiency in preparation for study abroad, there are other trends to consider. The past decade has witnessed a steady increase in student's preference for shorter duration programs. The Institute for International Education publishes *Open Doors*, an annual survey of 1,800 accredited U.S. higher education institutions that award credit for study abroad. *Open Doors* data for AY 2019-20, the most recent available, indicates that summer programs accounted for nearly one-third of all study abroad programs (32.2%); quarter- or semester-length programs accounted for 65.53%; and year-long programs accounted for a mere 3.5% of all programs (Institute of International Education, 2021). UCEAP can be proud of its 5% yearlong participation rate—a figure which has declined only slightly from 6.2% over the past five years—but there is no contesting the reality that a shorter period of immersion lessens opportunities for target language acquisition.

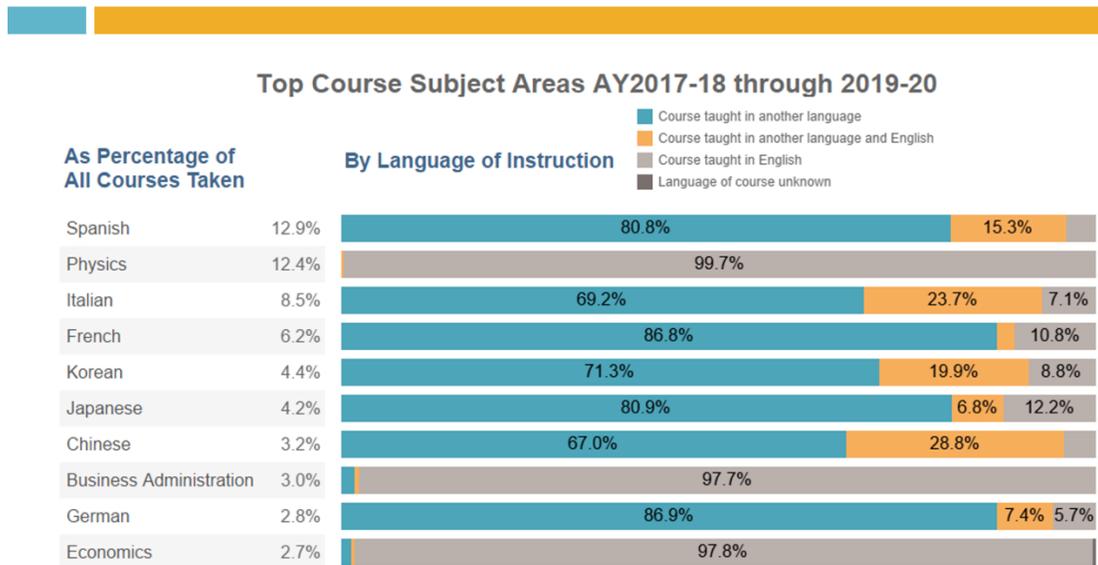
Additionally, following the development of the Erasmus Programme in 1987 and the signing of the Bologna Accord in 1999, universities across Europe have increased the availability of English-medium courses year over year in many, if not most disciplines. The initial goal was to develop consistent standards and provide academic comparability, thereby enabling EU students to pursue graduate study in universities beyond their own national borders. European universities soon began to build an English-medium of instruction (EMI) environment in their graduate degree programs to facilitate student mobility. However, universities then had to prepare their undergraduate students by introducing upper division coursework that was partially, if not always wholly, presented in English. The adoption of EMI is perceived in Europe variously as both an opportunity and a threat, but it has proven to be a boon to study abroad participants from English-speaking countries (Dimova et al., 2015).

This shift has worked particularly well in favor of American students, assuaging their fears that coursework in a language other than English could negatively impact their grade point average (GPA). They might be living in Madrid, Oslo, or Tokyo but their academic work is pursued in English. Looking ahead to AY 2022-23, UCEAP will operate a total of 348 summer, quarter-length, semester-length, and year-long programs. Of these, 294 (84%) will be in locations where English is either the dominant language or acknowledged as one of several official languages; another 14 (4%) will offer EMI in a location where English is neither dominant nor recognized officially as a national language. Study abroad professionals expect opportunities for EMI to expand rapidly, generally with official government backing (Dearden, 2014).¹

Students whose academic majors are highly structured and dependent on sequential coursework, e.g., engineering students, can find it difficult to leave for a semester or quarter, but a summer program can be feasible. Shorter summer programs can be more affordable for students, even when loss of income from summer jobs is factored in. Families who depend on their student’s income or other assistance—or who are more risk-averse—might be persuaded of the value of a few weeks of study abroad rather than having their student be absent for several months.

The dual factors of student preference for shorter programs and the greater availability of EMI would seem to sound the death knell for second language learning in study abroad. However, the forecast may not be as dire as it seems. UCEAP’s data on language study trends from AY 2017-18 through AY 2019-20 indicate that even with fewer students participating in yearlong immersion programs, 48% of students across all UCEAP programs enrolled in courses that were either in a language subject area or were in non-language subject areas taught in a language other than English.

Course Subject Areas



Given students' attention to maintaining GPA, it is not surprising that students who take courses in non-language subject areas overwhelmingly opt for EMI. What may be surprising is that language courses overall accounted for seven of the top 10 subject areas studied by *all* students on *any* UCEAP program during these three years. Spanish, Italian, French, Korean, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, and German accounted for 42.2% of all courses taken during the period prior to the pandemic; another 5-6% of the total of all courses taken included Arabic, Burmese, Cantonese, Catalan, Czech, Dutch, Gaelic, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Latin, Maori, Nahuatl, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian, Setswana, Swahili, Swedish, Thai, Twi, and Vietnamese. In sum, almost half (48%) of courses taken by UCEAP participants between AY 2017-18 and AY 2019-20 were either in a language other than English or in a language subject area.

A notable finding from the data is the significance of coursework taken in Spanish. In the years leading up to the pandemic, approximately 18% of UCEAP's students identified as Hispanic. Historically, those students for whom their first language (or language spoken at home) is Spanish may have felt that their degree of fluency in either or both languages marked them as language deficient. They may test out of campus language requirements successfully but do not feel confident in their ability to function successfully in a Spanish-language academic environment abroad. Having the opportunity to enroll in courses needed for major requirements via EMI abroad—thereby protecting their GPA—encourages these students to attempt elective courses in Spanish. Social immersion beyond the classroom builds further confidence and fluency.

Since UCEAP dropped a minimum Spanish language requirement for participation in its Spain programs, and with approved credit-bearing coursework in English, student interest in studying in Madrid at both Carlos III University and Complutense University has more than doubled. It is our hope that students who may have perceived themselves to be academically language-deficient might now understand their perceived deficits as *advantages* that will serve them well in their future careers.

INTELLIGENT STRATEGIES

As an administrator in a multi-campus public research university, I see the need to develop *intelligent strategies* that are inclusive, accessible, and holistic, yet tailored to specific needs. I advocate for the *courage* to implement those strategies through new modalities of outreach, collaboration, and program delivery, and I hope we can demonstrate the *heart* to support the current generation of study abroad participants successfully. If we can realize these aspirations, I believe we can traverse the new landscape of study abroad with confidence.

Administrative Support

For study abroad and language acquisition to be encouraged, attention to its value needs to be foregrounded. Does the institutional mission statement acknowledge the international reach and significance of its work? As a state-supported institution, the University of California's mission statement emphasizes its service to the people of California. However, its threefold mission of serving society through furthering research, supporting teaching, and engaging in meaningful public service is set in the context of a state with the fifth largest economy in the world: the University is one of the engines that drives the state's success. In its work of educating California's citizenry and promoting a knowledge-based society, the University also

benefits people far beyond the state's borders, now and in the future. International engagement should be lauded as integral to the University's mission.

More than 20 years ago, John A. Marcum, one of my predecessors as director of UCEAP, wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of the critical need to eliminate hurdles that keep students from participating in study abroad programs. Marcum (2001) identified the following major obstacles: affordability, diversity of programming, and capacity. After two decades, it's heartening to know that some gains have been made. EMI has facilitated increased capacity. Study abroad programming has broadened far beyond traditional immersion coursework on partner campuses to include a range of field and lab research opportunities, internships, and programs that incorporate local service work. Of Marcum's three barriers, the one that remains intractable is affordability; travel is expensive, foreign currency fluctuations are unpredictable, and students can lose paid work opportunities while abroad.

Addressing financial needs helps ensure equitable access to academic opportunities abroad. Development officers should be encouraged to include study abroad in their stewardship conversations with donors and alumni. I have advocated as well for some kind of *promise award* whereby incoming first year and transfer students would be guaranteed additional funding to be used for study abroad. Some institutions—mostly private liberal arts colleges—already use this model. At the most basic level, we must provide students with information on scholarship opportunities and help them navigate applications, e.g., holding information sessions and hosting writing workshops. But why not go further? How might we provide free passport photos on campus? How about free passports as a welcome to the institution, thereby signaling institutional commitment?

Another problem, already evident in Marcum's time, is addressing the negative impact of study abroad on funding for some campus academic departments. The problem can be particularly acute for language departments. Student headcount (translated into full-time equivalency or FTE) is a basic measure of the instructional service that a department provides to the campus. Students who take language courses abroad, whether out of interest or, especially, to fulfill requirements—are not taking those courses on campus, thereby potentially diminishing headcount, FTE, and campus funding to the department. Finding ways to reward departments financially for advancing study abroad—e.g., allocating FTE differently or developing a tuition-sharing model—should not be an insurmountable barrier to gaining their support.

Study abroad increases enrollment capacity. For a large public institution such as the University of California, where demand for admission far outstrips capacity, robust study abroad programs can assist in addressing enrollment management problems by allowing a campus to admit more students. Having students abroad frees up places in classrooms, labs, and dorms.²

Academic Collaboration

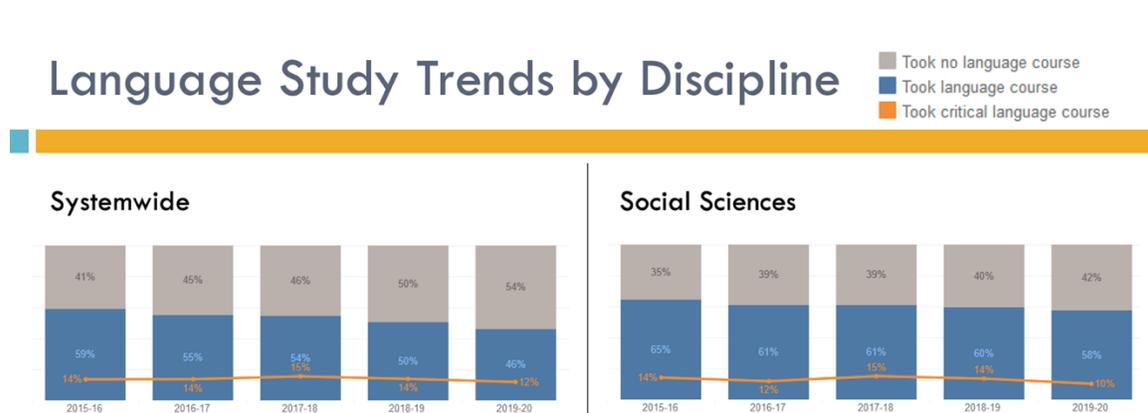
If students are to gain maximum academic benefit from a study abroad experience, every course must not only carry transferable credit but also fulfill an academic requirement. Successful course articulation, or what UCEAP calls academic integration, is critical. Study abroad staff must work closely with faculty to review program offerings and increase student awareness of courses that faculty will accept for credit, thereby offering some reassurance that progress to degree will not be impeded by studying abroad. To this end, UCEAP has collaborated with campus registrars across the system to develop the Campus Credit Abroad database—an interactive online resource that tracks past UCEAP courses and indicates the kind of credit (major, minor, general education, elective) that was awarded for each. Students

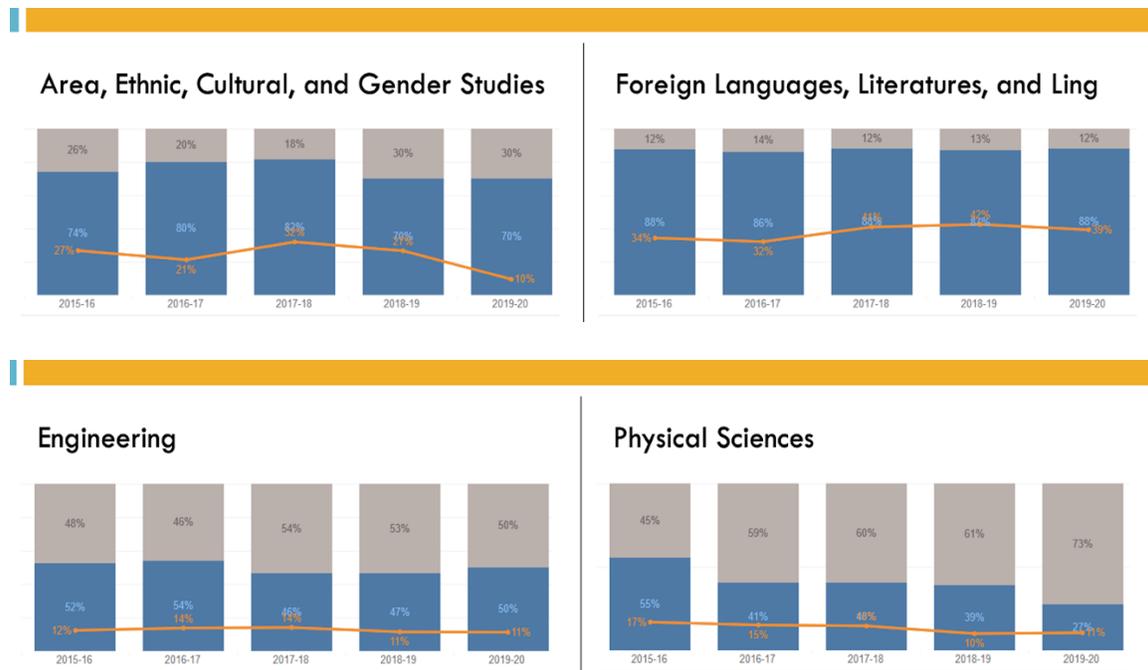
and faculty can filter for home campus, type of credit, country, partner institution, and subject. This has proven to be an invaluable advising tool, but faculty are often unaware of its existence.

Faculty can play a crucial role in supporting study abroad by pre-approving study abroad programs or courses, and by developing and publicizing pathways within their majors that display experience abroad within an on-time or accelerated time-to-degree framework. To incentivize this work, UCEAP offers modest Academic Integration grants of a few thousand dollars to encourage faculty-staff collaborations that identify major/minor tracks that incorporate study abroad at various points in the student’s academic career.

The goal of academic collaboration in the service of study abroad is to encourage students to understand the value such an experience adds to their education and pre-professional training. In addition to fulfilling immediate academic requirements, students who study abroad acquire soft skills and global skills that are highly valued by employers. A recent study by NAFSA, the non-profit association of international educators, examined 31 million job postings in 2019. Global skills including cultural awareness, foreign language, and sensitivity to diversity figured in 60% of the postings; other global skills mentioned included intercultural or cross-cultural communication, and global awareness. Soft skills listed in two-thirds of the postings included leadership and problem-solving, along with teamwork, tolerance for ambiguity, adaptability, and curiosity.³

Not every student will enroll in a language course while abroad. Nonetheless, UCEAP language study data for the five years leading up to the pandemic shows that roughly half of all students studying abroad on UCEAP programs did so. Most students majoring in foreign languages and literatures, linguistics, area studies, and ethnic/cultural/gender studies enrolled in language courses. Fewer than half the students in engineering and the physical sciences studied a language while abroad. Further study is needed to determine whether the highly structured nature of STEM curricula accounts for these students’ low participation in language study or whether they may already be speakers of two (or more) languages.





The Courage to Attempt New Modalities

Effective communication must be at the core of all we do as study abroad professionals. From initial outreach to maintaining ties with returnees, we need to meet students where they are. As an integral part of a campus internationalization plan, the promise of study abroad can be an effective recruitment tool. Admissions and study abroad staff must engage with prospective pre-college students to expose them to what might be possible. Geo-fencing ads, use of multiple social media platforms, and in-person attendance at college fairs make future possibilities visible.

Academic advisors are crucial allies; they are the ones who help students with early academic planning. Career centers, student affairs offices, student clubs, campus housing offices, alumni offices...all these campus nodes offer opportunities to educate the community on the academic benefits of study abroad and to cultivate allies and advocates. Unfortunately, it remains the case that study abroad is thought by some faculty and staff to be extra-curricular rather than solidly academic.

Conversations about the value of study abroad must reach beyond prospective students to include their parents or support networks. It is imperative to provide reassurance that study abroad programs advance academic goals and don't delay academic progress; that studying abroad is affordable; and, importantly, that the university's study abroad programs are undergirded by a strong support system that addresses health and safety needs. Some parents of students in underrepresented groups, including first generation students, benefit from targeted FAQs. Depending on student demographics, information should be available in Spanish or other languages. Informational webinars should include returnees or bilingual faculty leaders who can take time to respond to questions and concerns from all stakeholders with patience and empathy.

The Heart to Support Students Successfully

Many of us who've been around for a while remember the hardships of our own study abroad experiences. In pre-email days, we could only make "trunk calls" from the post office, where

we waited in line for the call to be put through and then could only afford to say a quick “Happy Birthday!” or “Love you!” before time was up. At \$14 a minute, I remember speaking very quickly. I also remember arriving in Taipei and realizing that I had absolutely no idea how I should address people; the Mandarin textbooks I’d used at my home university were rather militaristic 1970s mainland Chinese publications, meaning I only knew to address people as “comrade”—a forbidden term in Taiwan at the time. I could not order food, manage public transportation, or have a polite conversation. I could, however, ask my comrade to pass me a hand grenade, and I could warn others to jump into the nearest concrete-reinforced bunker. Hard times, indeed.

Today’s students have a world of advice and assistance in the palms of their hands, but it’s easy for non-digital natives to forget that a barrage of unmediated information can be overwhelming. Students today operate on a need-to-know basis, meaning that information and instructions are best presented at the right time and in the right manner. It is up to us to understand this not as an inability or stubborn unwillingness to process lengthy or complex information; meeting this need appropriately provides students with trustworthy advice and support as they require it.

The need for reliable and vetted professional support cannot be overemphasized. I often hear that the way to grow study abroad is to capitalize on faculty research partnerships. It’s true that a relatively small number of students might be accommodated in this way, and there’s no doubting the potential for significant benefit to those students. The concern, though, is that programs that depend on a small professional network or on a single faculty member can lack adequate support for students while abroad. Unless operating under a formal exchange agreement, there is no guarantee of appropriate support in the event of student illness or accident, or in the event of a natural or human-caused disaster. The need for support can be as straightforward as having language assistance for a medical appointment or as complex as a situation requiring law enforcement involvement. To provide support means to be ready for any or all these possibilities.

Ultimately, though, study abroad is not about enrollment management, participant numbers, or international agreements; it’s about students, all of whom are walking an unknown road, but not all of whom have guideposts or companions to turn to. Studying abroad brings surprises, both positive or negative. It disrupts one’s sense of identity. To encourage study abroad, we must know our students and understand how *they* view the world and their place in it. Old posters for study abroad often urged the viewer to “Picture yourself here!” But what was not said (or asked) was, “What would it be like to *be* yourself here?” In some cases, the answer might not be positive.

We owe it to our students to develop a binocular view of what it means to support them; we need to try to see the world from their vantage point, even as we may see matters differently. UCEAP has a staff-funded scholarship for Guardian Scholars (emancipated foster youth). We see financial need; the students, perhaps having no home outside the campus, might be thinking more immediately about where they’ll store their things safely while they’re abroad. Both are valid concerns. None of us can know all the experiences of our LGBTQ+ students, our vets, students with disabilities, or students who identify with one or more racial, ethnic, or religious minority groups. What we *can* know is that the experiences of these students will impact their time studying abroad. We need to employ our professional skills and extend our empathy as we strive to support them. We need to understand everyone involved with study abroad not just as stakeholders but as part of a community that we value. The still-lingering pandemic has tested our sense of that community, but it’s an entity worth preserving and strengthening.

As the COVID-19 virus evolves, and with the awareness that other global health challenges will surely arise, UCEAP has revised the COVID-related community compact previously required of all students to an infectious disease community compact. I suggest that this should broaden still farther to being a general community compact—the point being that students should recognize that just as others should care for them, they also bear responsibility for the well-being of others in their academic and social environments.

Closing Thoughts: Why Study Abroad Matters

The problems of climate change, sustainability, and social justice loom large and have immediacy for students today. The degree to which these concerns will impact student decision-making and expectations regarding study abroad is not yet clear. Given these concerns, however, it's critical for study abroad professionals to explain why study abroad matters.

I have noted above several practical reasons for campus administrators to support study abroad. Multiple studies show that study abroad improves retention and completion rates, especially for underrepresented or “at risk” students, and does not delay time to degree; students who've studied abroad exhibit greater intercultural learning; and many studies show that the skills gained through study abroad are the same skills that employers value, thus increasing employability and chances for career success. Study abroad, along with other international education strategies, e.g., collaborative online international learning (COIL), must be framed as integral to a campus's long-range strategic plan.

In early March 2017, then-UC President Janet Napolitano hosted “International Thinking Day” in Irvine. The impetus for the gathering of chancellors and systemwide administrators was the knowledge that all UC campuses engage in various forms of international activity, but such activity at both the campus and systemwide levels was widely distributed. International Thinking Day was seen as an opportunity to explore collectively what the university was doing and to envision its global future. Administrators from NYU, Duke University, and other higher educational institutions with high-profile international presence were invited to attend, participate in panel discussions, and offer recommendations. A repeated refrain from these external administrators was the importance of *increased attention to foreign language instruction*. In my view, it is regrettable that this recommendation has not yet been recognized as a systemwide priority.

At the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy Gale asserts, “There's no place like home!” While certainly true, it's also true that Dorothy's appreciation for home, family, friends, and neighbors was awakened precisely because of the challenges encountered and lessons learned in her travels. The understanding of one's own world is enriched ineluctably by experiencing what lies beyond its borders. To look outside is important; to look *from* the outside is equally important. Cultural and linguistic isolation are not options in our globalized future. To work in the world, one must know it and be able to speak to it. Study abroad today does not necessarily include foreign language instruction, but it can always demonstrate the value of additional language proficiency and stimulate student interest.

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regional program teams, to Julie Pollard and Jason Dodd, to Ralitsa Kirova, and to Maisee Thao. I alone am responsible for any errors that remain, and any opinions expressed herein are mine and do not reflect the views of the Regents or officers of the University of California.

NOTES

¹ Dearden, J. *English as a medium of instruction – a growing global phenomenon*. (2014). British Council. This study was conducted by EMI Oxford (The Centre for Research and Development in English Medium Instruction).

² Enrollment management considerations would seem to argue against equal reciprocal exchanges but welcoming some number of reciprocity students deserves administrative support. These students provide intercultural exposure and language learning opportunities for campus students who are unable to study abroad, thereby helping to internationalize the campus. Reciprocal exchanges create recruitment pipelines for graduate students and aid research collaboration. At UCEAP, we have found that reciprocity students maintain strong emotional ties to the specific UC campus at which they studied, often becoming stalwart supporters. All UCEAP alumni, whether having been in- or outbound, continue to “give back” to the University in many ways: they offer internship opportunities to current students, participate in career panels, mentor individual students, and provide financial support for scholarships.

³ NAFSA is the world’s largest nonprofit association of international educators. Links to multiple research studies that have measured the impact of study abroad are linked to the policy resources page of their website (nafsa.org). See, for example, NAFSA. (2020). *Developing a globally competitive workforce through study abroad: The value of study abroad skills in the U.S. job market*.

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