

Getting the Most Out of the Study Abroad Experience: Sharing from a Returnee

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I am one of the first cohort of SS students to graduate from the Joint Bachelor's Degree Program between CityU and Columbia University. I started my study at Columbia University in Fall 2015. I started working a month after I walked my commencement ceremony at Columbia University in May 2017. I stepped right into a position that I was somewhat familiar with as a student but not entirely, as a new administrative staff at CityU. My current job's responsibility in the Global Services Office at CityU includes taking care of the outbound exchange programme.



Student exchange programme became popular after the Second World War when many world leaders and educators realized the importance of exchanging ideas, understanding cultural differences and building international relationships. Agreements between universities all over the world are drawn ever since, and continue to expand, bringing students from different countries into one campus, diversifying the colors and opinions we see in it. That being said, going on exchange means more than traveling abroad, it should be an opportunity for our students to explore new cultures, hear different opinions, learn in a different teaching environment and hopefully, discover a path they would want to walk in the future after graduation.

“Exchange” is defined as “the act of giving and taking one thing in return for another” by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary. It’s not only an exchange of students between the universities, but also intangible things like ideas and perspectives. Our students when going abroad, should not only be taking from their host country – as in learning, absorbing, and understanding their culture or lifestyle, they should also be ready to give, to teach, to share the culture and



knowledge that they know and the opinions that they have no matter how different it is from people they are talking to.

I have students questioning why Hong Kong or World politics are a part of the student exchange interview questions, which in many ways works in advantage for students studying in Public Policy and may be a huge disadvantage for students majoring in Chemistry. The main reason is that we hope our students have sufficient knowledge about their own city and have an opinion about the world before they head off to have conversations with people they will be meeting on the road.

When I was on exchange, it is not uncommon for me to meet people who does not know where Hong Kong is on the world map. They do not know what SAR stands for, and though they probably have heard about the Umbrella Movement, they know little about it. I have had immigration officers asking me why I have a navy blue passport even though I am “Chinese” and there were times when someone knew a little bit more and asked why there is a tension between Mainland China and Hong Kong. Had I not known, anything about Hong Kong, I would not have been able “to give” during those situations.



There were also times when things I know were insufficient for the conversation. For example, during last year's president election in the States, it was really difficult for me to grasp why so many of my classmates were devastated – some were even balling their eyes out at 2 a.m. in the morning when Trump was elected. In my head, I thought, he has not done anything yet apart from making ridiculous speeches of what he plans to do once he is elected. Certainly a Muslim ban or dismissing Global Warming as a real issue is not possible, right? It was only after in-depth conversations with friends and classmates and reading many more news that rolled in that I understood the gravity of this election.



community. A lot of times, staying on campus and going out with college friends limits you to what you see – you will only see what college students see. However, when you volunteer, you get to see other parts of the city that you would not have seen otherwise. I joined Habitat for Humanity and helped building houses at areas that need to be rebuilt. It was there that I met other kind-hearted volunteers who had more stories to share and I also learnt that life is equally difficult for some people out there. I volunteered to teach at a local middle school as well and that gave me the chance to see what schools in the States looked like and how their education system is like. One thing that I will never forget is being an interpreter for a Chinese man who immigrated to the States and does not

The opportunity of going on exchange and staying at a certain city for a semester means that students get to know the place in a way that tourists cannot. It is important that you take the time to actually experience the city thoroughly. Like the old saying goes, “When in Rome do as the Romans do” – try something new, learn the place's language or challenge yourself to pick up their accent; visit a new neighborhood and even join the festival parade that is happening down the street. As a college student, I went trick-or-treating in a neighborhood with some kindergarteners dressed as princesses, astronauts and Chewbaccas (who says you are too old for sweets?). I tried the sweet potato casserole and had haloumi cheese for the first time when I was in the States. New Yorkers do not go see the ball drop on New Year's Eve, and so I skipped the long cold wait at Times Square and instead spent time enjoying the last minute of 2015 at a friend's place (exactly what New Yorkers would do).

speaking English on Teachers-Parents' day. His son, studied at a prestigious high school at New York and academically is doing great, as I interpreted the praises that the teachers had for his son, I saw the man beaming with pride although he could not say thank you but bowed and smiled. There are struggles everywhere in different forms for everyone, and going on exchange sometimes help you see that you are not the only one struggling.

Another way of experiencing or knowing better what it is like living in that certain City is by volunteering at the local



A point that students often neglect when they are on exchange is their studies which is somewhat ironic since a student should be studying. I personally would recommend students to actually spend time to study even when they are on exchange. It does not hurt to sit in your host university's library or read that book that is in the recommended reading list of the course syllabus. Yes, getting a passing grade is really all you need to transfer your credits back to CityU, but again, would you not agree that you would find yourself impressive if you could get an A when you are studying at a foreign university? Challenge yourself academically even when you are abroad. Talk to professors and explore more in-depth on topics that you are interested. I remember finding "curiosity" interesting when I was on exchange, leading to a lot of my assignments that semester completed by revolving around this topic. Later when I was in Columbia, I also found the phenomena of Chinese people using English names extremely fascinating and could

not help but indulge myself with more information on this topic by interacting with professors and reading related articles. It is okay to be nerdy, especially when you are abroad, no one is going to say you are weird, and even if they say so, it does not matter.

Do not be afraid to make mistakes, to find yourself lost every now and then, or that you have come to an awkward disagreement with someone you just met because you like peanut butter and they do not. It is all part of the exchange experience. They say exchange programme allows student to be more independent and have a better holistic development, research have also shown that the career aspects of students who have went on exchange are much better compared to those who have not. Are those sayings merely a cliché statement? Find out yourself, I assure you that you will not regret it.



Student

Project X Training Camp 2017



Most of the university orientation camps aim at enlarging students' social network and enriching their university life. On top of that, SS training camps involved elements that are beneficial to students in various aspects. In the past summer, Project X and the SS mentors from different cohorts and four majors: Social Work, Psychology, Criminology, and Sociology, organized a series of training camps tailor-made for their fellow mentees.

In the 2- to 3-day overnight camps, the mentors prepared for activities and exercises which exemplify the uniqueness of their majors. Through interactive games and sharing, the mentors passed on their learning experiences and practices to the junior mentees. Apart from learning the soft and hard skills, students could also build a cohesive mentoring rapport through the training camps.

Students' sharing: **Mr. Chow Cheuk Yin, Leo** **(Major in Psychology, BSS2, Cohort 2016)**

As a mentee of the Peer Network Scheme (PNS) last year, I understand the adjustment needs of a Psychology freshman, and the importance of having a responsible mentor. I decided to join PNS and served as a mentor this year. I believed that being a mentor is not an easy thing, especially for a year four student, and I already have a rough idea about that. But after I entered the preparation stage of the psychology training camp, I found that the situation was far more complex than what I expected. I was responsible for the camp tee, camp book, and

the design of "Psy-elements" activities in the mentor team. I initially thought that these tasks were quite easy, compared to the tasks of other teams. But I eventually realized that there were indeed no easy tasks in the preparation of a successful training camp. As the camp was going to start soon and our preparation has not completed yet, I started to feel exhausted and distressed for my low efficiency. At that time, many people gave me support. PNS staffs always showed their concern and gave useful advice to us. My mentors last year shared their experiences with us, and commented on our activities, and encouraged us to keep going. Most importantly, I have my fellow mentors with me. We worked together; we exhausted together, and we fought together. Having these nice guys and gals to work with was the most precious gain in the last few months.



**Miss. Fan Hiu Tung, Ellie
(Major in Social Work, BSS4, Cohort 2015)**

“To truly carry the mental load for someone, it demands our strength and actions rather than our words solely.” It was said by Remus, who is also nicknamed “the Father of Donuts” by us for being such a supportive project leader, when we were demonstrating one of the games named “Trust Circle” in Social Work Training Camp 2017. In the social work family, I am thankful that I have received support not only from other mentors, especially my partners Debbie and Lala, but also from all other people, such as Mok sir and senior mentors. It is deeply fulfilling to be able to make things happen in an environment filled with team spirit and mutual trust. The experience of being a mentor has been moving me deeply and bringing me both enjoyment and satisfaction in a way beyond my imagination. It constantly motivated me to step out of my comfort zone without caring about the outcomes. From being a mentee to becoming a mentor now, I have met inspiring mentors and mentees. I gladly had their company, to walk beside each other, in this pilgrimage.

**Miss. Ng Wing Lam
(Major in Applied Sociology, BSS4, Cohort 2015)**

To be one of the core members in the training camp was not an easy job at all, as your schedule would be packed with tons of meetings and work needed to be handled. The most torturing part was designing the games. The games should consist of both criminology and sociology components, and they had to be entertaining at the same time. This was the most time-consuming and bothering part. Thanks to my team and helpers for giving lots of advice, the games were so successful. More importantly, the satisfaction and the achievement from holding the training camp is totally irreplaceable. When I saw the growth among our mentees and mentors, and when someone said they really enjoyed the camp and games designed by me, I could feel my tears of joy. The process of organizing training camp was hard. I was so grateful that there were many people and other mentors supporting me. I had regretted joining it before. But now after seeing my growth, I would say I would have had regret if I did not seize the chance of taking part in it.

**Mr. Lam Chun Man, Omen
(Major in Criminology, BSS4, Cohort 2014)**

It is a great chance to challenge yourself. Organizing a training camp requires numerous work, such as campsite reservation, budget management, game design and promotion of the event. Those preparation work took a month to be completed before the training camp. However, it will become one of the most memorable summers in your university life. Project X has organized a series of training to help us prepare for the training camp. We built up friendship with classmates, mentees and fellow students from other majors through the training. Apart from that, it also allows us to gain hands-on experience comprehensively. My partners and I shared the administrative work, game-designing work, and the operation work. A training camp is a little bit different from an orientation camp, as it requires us to relate the activities to our major in depth and in breadth. The game design would need to involve more elements from the subjects. For example, the detective game contains the knowledge of criminology, and the socio-game could bring various social meanings. Being the host of the camp helped me gain different experience which is definitely more than just being an o-camp participant.



Community

Lions Clubs International District 303 Hong Kong & Macau, China Visiting CityU: Showcase of City-Youth Empowerment Project (CYEP)



A delegation of 78 members from the Lions Clubs International District 303 Hong Kong & Macau, China visited CityU on 19th August, 2017. Vice-President (Development and External Relations), Professor Matthew LEE, extended his warm welcome to the Lions delegates. The project convenor of City-Youth Empowerment Project (CYEP), Dr. Elaine AU, was invited to attend. She introduced CYEP as one of the student development programmes. It was a great chance to highlight university's emphasis on student development through actively engaging with the community and creating service-learning experiences.

Dr. AU introduced the history of the project development and shared about the current success of establishing strong connections with the community. As a service-learning project under SS Department, social work values are the essential elements in the operation and substantiation of the project working for student development and community engagement. Dr. AU emphasized the values of "Empowerment", which has guided us through the past years in reaching out to the community and positively developing our youngsters.



CYEP Statistics for 2016-17

Number of enrolled volunteers:	1,630
Total number of service hours:	28,258
Total number of service hours accumulated:	172,856



In addition to Dr. AU's presentation, CYEP officers and Volunteer Ambassadors tried out new ideas and prepared an exhibition to showcase the achievement and essential background information of the project. Lions delegates showed their interest in knowing about students' volunteering experiences, and how they reached out to the community both locally and globally. They were greatly impressed by the energetic young people for being so dedicated not only as volunteers, but also as global citizens. Such an interactive platform enhanced the possibilities for future collaborations.

Message from Head

Last year the admissions exercise was changed from college-based to departmental-based admissions. The admissions figures for both the JUPAS main offer round and the senior year intake were consistently high. The average for HKDSE English and subject scores were higher than University average, as was the number of senior year entry intakes with a distinction in their sub-degree, demonstrating our success in attracting top-performing students. At the post-graduate level, the proposed Master of Arts in Applied Social Sciences (MAASS) was approved by the Senate. It integrated the existing master programmes into 3 streams: criminology, applied sociology, and advanced social work. The re-organisation aims to increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of the programme in striving for academic excellence and higher international standing. This M.A. programme will be launched in September 2018.

Two projects with funding of about \$10 million were supported by the UGC Teaching and Learning Fund to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. They are: “Enhancing University Students’ Well-being and Positive Learning Experience -- Application of Positive Education” and “Strengthening the Alignment of Residential Education and University Educational Aims”. Meanwhile, we continue to hold the City Youth Empowerment Project to provide all-round student education. The project involves a number of award-winning activities. The long-term impact of co-curricular activities on students’ whole-person and career development was tracked by the Character and Career Development Project, which demonstrates our commitment to equipping students with professional skills and knowledge that can be applied in the workplace.

The Two-Certificate Joint Bachelor’s Degree Programmes with Columbia University continue to thrive, and has admitted 5 Psychology and 2 Sociology students since 2015. The first psychology student graduated in the summer of 2017. To strengthen alumni relations, three alumni dinners were organised in summer for alumni from different cohorts to celebrate their 10th or 20th anniversary. We will continue to invite alumni to serve as graduate mentors, guest speakers, or fieldwork supervisors. Knowledge building and transfer is the core value of university, and thus our department has been active in organising academic conferences. The Honourable Matthew Cheung Kin-Chung, Chief Secretary for

Administration, officiated in two of our conferences in summer, first in an international conference on offenders’ rehabilitation and second in a symposium on character building through positive psychology. The first event was co-organised with the Correctional Services Department, and the second one was with Wofoo Social Enterprises. These conferences served as an important platform for leading scholars, policy makers, researchers, practitioners and students in the fields of criminology and positive education to share knowledge, practices, and issues on offender correction, as well as the role of education in character development.

Moreover, we won the bid to host the 16th World Society of Victimology Symposium (a world congress held once in every three years) at CityU in June 2018. A number of local welfare organizations and government departments are supporting the organization of this event. We welcome participation and paper presentation at the conference.

Our department has aspired to become a leading social science department in Asia. In the latest QS World University Rankings by subject, CityU was ranked the 47th in Social Policy and Administration (in which social work and the majority of criminology is housed). In 2016-17, CityU came in the first place in “Chinese Criminology” in an empirical study published in the Asian Journal of Criminology.

Prof. Wing LO
Head

Department of Applied Social Sciences

