Understanding the Student Experience—INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Our growing international student population, estimated at 123 for fall 2014, prompts investigation of their experiences. Responses to last year’s survey of faculty teaching first-year international students were marked with empathetic surprise: “How can I help my English-learning student?” Encouraging, this year’s 35 responses showed increased sophistication in identifying the specific needs of international students. One example is the need for instruction on the U.S. style of argumentative essay writing. As such, it is no wonder that the student survey identified the Center for Academic Excellence and faculty office hours as essential to their improvement. To further augment academic supports in 2014-2015, the CAE faculty will offer writing and study-skills workshops co-sponsored by International Programs.

Despite the academic challenges, first-year international students achieved a fall 2013 GPA of 3.22 and spring 2014 GPA of 3.34, and 100% found their professors and the Oxy community supportive and respectful. While students expressed contentment with their social lives and ambivalence about more programming, IPO will continue to partner with student cultural clubs and organizations to host International Coffee Hour each month in the McKinnon atrium during 2014-2015. Emmons has agreed to offer a program on adjustment processes.

An encouraging finding for fall 2013 first-year international students indicated a good or excellent “understanding of the Oxy experience prior to attending.”

CLASS of 2014 International Students Start WORK AFTER OXY!

Putting their Oxy education to good use and utilizing an important benefit of the F-1 student visa, Optional Practical Training (OPT), Binh Vuong (Biology, Marine Emphasis, Vietnam), Marisha Thacker (Theater & UEP, India) and Mirja Heitzmann (History, Nigeria) begin working this summer in vocations directly related to their majors.

Applying his marine biology skills and knowledge, Binh is restoring kelp and green abalone in the waters off Los Angeles for the Bay Foundation (TBF), a partner of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission. TBF and the implementation of its Bay Restoration Plan have made massive improvements to the human and environmental health of our region.

Marisha integrates themes of both her Theater and UEP comps projects, to conduct green design research and marketing for a Tony Award-winning designer at The Broadway Green Alliance, a coalition of educators to “count what matters,” we expand our traditional data by highlighting College-Sponsored travelers, page 3. Beyond numbers, we seek to understand the student experience. For out-bound students, we delve deeply into the contribution international experiences make to vocational development, page 2. For international students, we document our manifold efforts to appreciate and support their success, page 4.

Highlights for the year include:

Student Mobility - Up from under half the class historically, participation in credit-bearing study abroad rose to 54% using the methodology of the national study abroad census, IIE’s Open Doors. Our 108 Richter/College-Sponsored Travelers (Young, Richter, Glee Club, NSF, URC, Anderson, Maes, Luce, etc.), increase our global engagement rate to 76.8%, page 3.

Program Development - Informed by our history of collaborative management with DWA and through three directors (Sherry, Hirsch and now Gardner) of the The William and Elizabeth Kahane United Nations Program at Occidental College (Oxy at the UN) we partnered with Politics faculty to prepare eleven Fall 2013 Campaign Semester participants and three DC Internship semester (pilot, Spring 2014) participants.

International Student Services – On-going assessment of and advocacy for 107 international students. Methods included a three-part series of discussions with campus stakeholders (faculty, Center for Academic Excellence, student aides, admission, etc.), fall-year student interviews; faculty survey, and analysis of key success indicators such as GPA and student survey results, page 4.

Diversity of Participants - Students of color make up 29% of study abroad participants and 42% of College-Sponsored travelers. Compare the box (right) and the chart on page 3.

Diversity of Programs - Launched two new short-term faculty-led courses: Eric Frank’s Art and Biography of Michelangelo (Fall on campus, plus January field study in Italy) and Ben Elskes and Jeremy Clay’s Tropical Ecology (Spring on campus, plus May-June lab in Costa Rica and Panama). Both courses resulted in excellent student evaluations and strong evidence of student learning in appropriate domains.

Administrative Practices - We strengthened our infrastructure and core practices by implementing Terra Dotta, a web-based application and data management software. The system increases administrative efficiency, advances our data management and enhances our capacity for crisis avoidance and response, thus creating a foundation for continued innovation.
Understanding the Student Experience - VOCATIONAL DIRECTION

What meaning do students derive from their experiences abroad and what new skills and behaviors do they embrace? Simply put, what do they learn? Of IPO’s established student learning outcomes, we focus our review of just one in this report: students will identify and comparative dimensions of an emerging vocational direction.

Our intentional, educational interventions start with advising. On the study abroad planning worksheet, sophomores must address “How study abroad fits into (their) career and/or educational plans.” We probe their answers, challenge the program choice, point out inconsistencies, suggest options with a stronger thematic connection, suitable internships, research placements, or relevant courses. The application process builds on this. After demonstrating research relevant to the country and program, aspirants detail “How study abroad will contribute to (their) development (intellectual, cultural, career, or otherwise).” In her proposal to study in Peru, Mikayla Branz (“Psych/Spanish,” ’15) set this vocational learning goal: “I will gain a greater appreciation for the impact that different backgrounds can have on people, including an understanding of how South American families function and how this might affect their experiences in the U.S. I will be able to be understanding and compassionate as a clinical psychologist.”

Mandatory orientation continues to stimulate intellectual curiosity and motivation to learn more, according to student evaluations. Upon return, opportunities abound to deepen meaning and sharpen purposes/career goals. Valerie Saxon, director of the Career Development Center, provides specialized workshops. Her powerful presentation emphasizes understanding and marketing the skills and knowledge gained abroad, the attributes sought by employers (NACE, 2014). Finally, our annual photo contest aligned submission categories to three of IPO’s student learning outcomes, including career. Harnessing Global Crossroads technology, 28 students demonstrated their learning visually and in writing through over 100 entries. Grace Bender ’15 (Biology) submitted the photo (left) and this interpretation - “The real cost of a banana includes the health of workers, communities, and the rainforest. Bananas cost far more than the $1 we pay at Oxy” - as evidence of her “international vocational perspective.” She won first prize in that category.

Finally, our returnee evaluation and impact assessment survey asks students to connect their experience with vocational aspirations. Semester abroad participants attribute learning to understand global perspectives (97%), growth in leadership skills (84%), and enhancement of career path (83%) to their experience. Their writing corroborated this vocational impact:

- “I want to have a career that has a positive impact on society. Studying abroad made me question my personal values about what are and are not positive contributions to the global community.”
- “I gained an understanding that will contribute to my literary work, social justice campaigns and a career involving communication.”
- “I now have the resources to represent and express a voice that is marginalized internationally. (It) is my duty to work with this voice so the world hears it and understands its value so global decisions become more empathetic and inclusive.”

All of the participants in the faculty-led biology course to Costa Rica and Panama affirmed that their learning included “enhanced career exploration/preparation” in addition to many other course outcomes. In response to an open-ended question, one wrote, “I feel I could end my four years at Oxy with this experience. At the beginning of the trip, I felt relatively sure that grad school was in my future, at a vague time to be determined. Going home, I have a list of prospective schools, a strategy for finding a program and people to work with, reassurance and confidence that this is what I want to do with my life, and a plan to start grad school next fall. I’d call that a success — THANK YOU!”

In their unsolicited “thank you” notes to the Paul K. and Evalyn E. Cook Richter Memorial Trust officer, summer 2013 scholars unanimously linked their learning abroad with intended graduate study and professional paths. One wrote: “(My) interest in this area was magnified by my research, without which, I would never have known how much I love this kind of work and probably would have never pursued this as a potential career, like I am doing now.”

Measuring Oxy’s Global Engagement - College Sponsored Travelers

Innovating beyond traditional “study abroad,” these College-sponsored projects are funded by or sponsored with faculty grant-sharing through the National Science Foundation, academic departments, or College funds such as Young LC, Richter, Luce, Anderson and Schwartz. IPO began supporting and tracking these travelers in the 2011-2012 academic year. Since then, participation has grown steadily. (See graph, right). They impact student learning: internationalize the Oxy experience and ensure access by our diverse student body. (See Diversity box, below, right.) They make an important contribution to Oxy’s global engagement.

The winter spike includes 45 participants in the Music Department’s Glee Club Europe concert series, Sanjeev Khagram’s student delegation to the Global Entrepreneurship Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in October 2013 are the “other timing” experience indicated.

The IPO supports College-Sponsored travelers, includes - stewardship and guidance through the U.S. Department of State travel warning appeal process - specialized orientation materials and sessions - health and safety clearance - on-site support and crisis management - faculty/administrator’s pilot workshop (19 participants including Global Affairs, Title IX Officer, Biology, Urban and Environmental Policy faculty, Emmons staff, etc.)

Mission-aligned outcomes include a group of student participants even more diverse than traditional study abroad. Compare the charts on p.1 and the chart, right.