



STUDENT MOBILITY DURING COVID-19: A UNIVERSITY SYSTEMWIDE RESPONSE

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Like others in the international education community, we at the University of California have been jolted by the effects of COVID-19. The University of California Education Abroad Program (UCEAP) is a flagship systemwide student exchange program, sending nearly 6,000 UC students to over 40 countries and receiving over 1,500 exchange students into the nine undergraduate campuses during 2018-19. When the pandemic escalated, we wrestled with how best to support our students in an extremely complex and fluid environment. We still grapple with lingering challenges and future uncertainties, but we have learned some important lessons on operating a systemwide program during a global health crisis.

CONDITION-SPECIFIC DECISION-MAKING

While some in the system questioned why UCEAP did not make a blanket decision at once to suspend our spring programs, we considered a multitude of factors for each location and specific program that could have differential consequences on students. Every judgment call was based on the goal of minimizing academic and financial losses for as many students as possible, with health and safety the top priority. Not only were program suspensions based upon US State Department, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and UC travel advisories, the timing of suspension dates took into account students' travel and health insurance coverage period as well as financial aid implications.

We underscored to students the importance of returning home, all the while allowing them to enroll in remote learning with our partners when possible. Exceptions were made for students who could not travel "home" (e.g., to China or other countries with closed borders) or who chose to remain for whatever reasons. In fact, some parents strongly felt that their student would be safer remaining in the host country than returning. Although blanket decisions would have been more convenient, our hindsight confirms that a nuanced approach best served our students; approximately 75% of our outbound students were able to continue their academic coursework for the spring term.

RESPONSIVE COMMUNICATION EFFORTS

Communication gaps are unavoidable in unprecedented times. Most challenging was sharing accurate and timely information with the nine undergraduate UC campuses about program

statuses and suspensions across 90 international sites; students' academic decisions; student travel plans; and students' visa status and ability to return to the US or to their home country. Students were asked to make immediate decisions regarding their course work and participation which might impact their financial aid or degree progress—details that UCEAP and the respective campus offices were ironing out in the moment. As communications from students rolled in, our staff quickly realized the need for a dynamic, interactive, cloud-based database that campus administrators and staff could access for ready information. Creating this mechanism took immense effort but paid off in ease of universal access to up-to-date information. In the aftermath, UCEAP is surveying participants, applicants, and parents on the impact of COVID-19 to better understand their experience in order to improve our communication and resources.

THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM ADVANTAGE

While the multi-campus UC system adds complexity to our decision-making and processes, multiple campuses can also be a great source of support. UCEAP was already adjusting policies to accommodate academic disruptions (e.g., allowing flexibility on grading options and re-sit exams), but other academic challenges required creative collaboration. Since program suspensions occurred mid-semester, UC students from the semester campuses faced greater academic disruption than students from quarter campuses. Collaborative efforts among campuses enhanced student academic progress: e.g., a quarter campus taking in semester students to allow the completion of a spring term. Additionally, UC's own intercampus online course provider, the Innovative Learning Technology Initiative (ILTI), allowed UCEAP students affected by travel restrictions to register for online coursework past deadline. Identifying collaborative resources across this vast system has been key to helping students.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

We remain mindful of the toll the pandemic has taken on our staff in the US and abroad. Building a sense of community and understanding is more important than ever. Our creative in-house staff launched UCEAPeeps, in which each week, staff at one of our international field offices provide a glimpse of local culture and the impact of COVID-19 in current everyday life. With over 100 regular participants, including staff from the systemwide office, the nine UC campuses, and international offices, UCEAPeeps provides an opportunity for connection among colleagues—many of whom are meeting (virtually) for the first time. Such activities remind us that community makes us more resilient and that practices such as this, developed during the pandemic, are worth maintaining.

Recent upticks in global COVID-19 cases indicate the crisis will persist for some foreseeable time, but we at UCEAP—along with all our partners—will continue to learn, refine our practice, explore new pathways, and move forward.

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