

## **UCL SCHOLARS PROGRAM PARTICIPANT COMMENTS FALL 2019 & 2018**

### **2019 Comments**

#### **Alexandra Bodrova '20 – Mechanical Engineering Caltech & UCL**

As I am already an international student at Caltech, most of my friends found it bizarre that I wanted to engage in the Study Abroad program. But I was absolutely settled on not stopping exploring after I moved across the Ocean to Caltech, but rather broaden my horizons even more. And while I knew studying at UCL would be very different from Caltech, only when I arrived in London, did I realize it is completely different from anything I have ever experienced. And quickly, as if by a woosh of a magic wand, I loved it.

One of the most different things from Caltech that stood out to me right away were the teaching and learning approaches here. At UCL all of my lectures are two hours long and occur once a week for each subject, although if a subject is divided in two like Dynamics & Control, it's two different lectures a week. The rest of your time is given to you to conduct deeper material study on your own or go through the covered material again. While you do not turn in problem sets here, it helps to still do them and then learn the correct answers at the next lecture or later on Moodle to keep track of your own understanding. Apart from taking engineering classes on both the undergraduate and master's levels, I decided to take two humanity courses to go as my electives. I picked History of Art courses in Architecture and in Modern and Contemporary Art. These classes are the most exciting ones I have ever had, and they were totally the right choice for me. During lecture time we go to different sites in London such as museums, galleries, and historic buildings, and the lectures are held right in front of the particular artwork or inside of the architectural site in question. That is almost like getting free tours around London with highly educated guides every week!

Furthermore, UCL's lecture schedule allows me to explore London and other European cities a lot while I am here. Almost every weekend I travel to a new city, and if I stay in London, there is so much to explore! I love the big city vibe and pace, and most of all I love walking through the city and just enjoy the Architecture, the parks, and my free time. The fact that UCL's campus is practically situated in central London helps so much with choosing the walking option instead of public transportation, which is also an easy way to get around if you prefer. I do wish I had even more weekends here to fit all of it in and not miss a thing. The trips to Europe have been incredibly bright and have made me the extremely happy I chose this path. I spent my weekend walking through beautiful cities like Copenhagen and Edinburgh, looking at little castles where absolutely regular people live. The architecture and the lifestyle are so different from Southern California that it feels like you are truly in a fairy tale when in Europe.

I could talk about UCL, London, and Europe in general for long and long pages, but no words can describe this experience in its fullest. That is why you've got to try it yourself! Your experience will likely vary a lot from mine since there are just so many options here. But one thing I can promise you is that you will not be disappointed.

#### **Jade Livingston '19 – Biology and History Caltech & Biological Sciences UCL**

My time at UCL has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my time in college. I've wanted to study abroad since before I came to college; it's one of the reasons I chose Caltech. Midway through sophomore year I realized that my schedule worked such that I could study abroad in London my senior year, and so I went for it, and I am so glad I did. Studying at UCL

is fundamentally different than studying at Caltech. I would say the biggest difference is the size. While studying at Caltech you can feasibly get to know everyone in your year, UCL has a student population the size of a small country (40,000+). There are always new people to meet, new things to do, and new places to see.

My favorite part of studying at UCL has definitely been the societies. I have joined several societies and gone to events hosted by many others. Just in the first week I went to a West End Production of *Waitress* with the Musical Theatre society, toured old London with the Harry Potter society, played D&D for the first time with the Sci-Fi and Fantasy Society, practiced pole dancing with the Pole Fitness society, and went on a river cruise of the Thames hosted by the student council. In the first few weeks all the societies have "Give It A Go" events where they allow anyone to participate in activities that they might have never tried before, from kickboxing to hang-gliding. Beyond their weekly events (be they board game nights, dance practices, film screenings, or what have you based on the society), societies will host socials which can be anything from fancy dinners to pub crawls. I'm lucky enough to have joined a production of *American Idiot* that will happen in November. Between the numerous societies, the local clubs, and the pubs on and off campus, the social scene at UCL is far more active than at Caltech, and meeting new people is incredibly easy.

I was a little worried about the food when coming to UCL because I had an image in my head of London food just being forms of boiled meats. To my delight, there is a plethora of excellent food options close to, and even on campus. Every day at lunchtime there is a selection of street food vendors in the heart of campus that sell bao, halloumi wraps, jerk chicken, falafel, and more, and there are more street food options 5 minutes away. Additionally, every Thursday there is a farmer's market on campus that sells everything from steak pies to freshmade Italian pasta. That's not even addressing the amazing food available further from campus in Camden or in Soho. Suffice to say, we eat well.

Classes at UCL are different from Caltech, with far less work per week and essays taking up the majority of the grade in the Biological Sciences. Grades are very different from what I am used to, as a 70% is considered an A, and a grade above 80 or 90 is unattainable, being reserved for work that ought to be immediately published. For my two biology courses, I am taking Life on Earth and Vertebrate Life and Evolution. Life on Earth focuses on the origins of life and how life as we know it developed. It is taught by a rotating selection of UCL professors, some of whom are celebrities in the field of biology. Starting the class, I was worried I would find it elementary, but the lecturers have been fantastic, presenting recent results and interesting topics with clear enthusiasm and interest in the students' understanding. One of the lectures in particular, on the origin of eukaryotic life, was one of the best lectures I have ever been to. Vertebrate Life and Evolution is a project-based course that takes a more specialized look at vertebrate life, in which our final assignment is to identify the species of origin of an unlabeled bone we were given, and then present that information to the public at the Grant Museum of Zoology. My humanities classes have been similarly interesting, focusing on medieval history and modern art and taking me all around London to the British Museum, Tate Britain, the British Library, the Stuart Hall Library, and many more places. The lighter workload has given me a chance to meet new people and try new things, but the classes are still some of the most interesting and well-taught classes I've taken.

## **Sierra Lopezalles '20 – Biology and History Caltech & Biological Sciences UCL**

Study abroad is the chance to experience something new: a new city, a new school, a new set of professors and classes, new clubs.

UCL is a very different school in comparison to Caltech. Though the campus is still pretty small, the undergraduate population is massive (about 40,000 students). This leads to a much greater diversity in professors and classes offered. At UCL I was able to take classes that are not offered at Caltech – like beginner Latin and vertebrate evolution. This access to more diverse classes is great for learning things that might be outside of the scope of what is offered at Caltech due to the limited size of the faculty in comparison.

On top of this, UCL has a different class structure. Most classes have only 2-3 hours of lecture per week and most of the focus is on self-driven readings that you are expected to do outside of class. This means that I have more time to study the material at my own pace, which is relaxing, but requires me to be on top my readings. Few of my classes have any projects or practicals (labs) and the final grade is entirely based on a final essay – even my biology classes. (Many classes have final exams.)

So far, I've really enjoyed all of my classes as UCL. In one of my classes we were given an unknown animal bone specimen and have needed to conduct research in order to determine the species. At the end of the term we will even be presenting our findings to the public at the Grant Museum of Zoology! (UCL has several of their own museums on campus such as the well-known Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology.)

Another large part of the culture is societies. UCL has over 300 different clubs and societies and they are a great way to meet people that share similar interests, make friends, and get involved. I wouldn't recommend joining more than 2 or 3, because there really isn't enough time to go that many activities, but I do think it helps to be a part of one group with regular meetings to pull me away from schoolwork. Most clubs have a weekly pub night where everyone hangs out together in one of the UCL bars. My favorite society is the Stage Crew Society which does all the backstage technical work for plays, musicals, concerts, and other events at UCL. Not only have I learned a lot and gotten to participate in a lot of really cool shows, but I also met a lot of my closest friends there.

Beyond school, UCL is right in the middle in the middle of London and very close to so many cool attractions and historical sites. The public transit in London also makes it very easy to get around. All of the museums in London have free entry and I've already been to the Natural History Museum and the British Library, both of which were great experiences. Shakespeare's Globe Theater is also in London and definitely one of my favorite places to go so far.

Lastly, living in London gives you to chance to experience new weather. Rather than sunshine every day, the leaves actually change color in the Fall, it gets cold, and rains pretty much all the time. Which brings me to my greatest piece of advice: if you're going to London – bring an umbrella.

## **2018 Comments**

### **Nishanth Bhaskara '19 – Mathematics & Computer Science Caltech & Computer Science UCL**

I always thought that the study abroad students saying that the experience was life changing was an exaggeration; but now that I'm in their shoes, I couldn't agree more. UCL, London, and on a larger scale Europe, have been all that I've hoped for and more. The immersion into a completely new culture and society, with new food, new sights, and new people is indescribable. I am very happy that I chose UCL as the school to base my adventures from as it offers a plethora of opportunities, both academically and socially.

The academic system at UCL is different from that of Caltech. The weekly problem sets that I've grown familiar with over the last few years at Caltech are nonexistent in any of my classes abroad. Instead, we have 1-2 assignments per class, and if present, the final accounts for most of the grade. The assignments themselves are not that time consuming (e.g., 2500 word essays for my humanities classes), but it does require some planning and forethought. My two humanities classes, one in archaeology and one in architecture, are definitely the best part of my academic experience here. Every single class is a field trip to a different historic site in London. So far we've been to countless museums, Westminster Abbey, The Tower of London, Buckingham Palace, Queen's House, Whitehall, and several other minor sites along the way. The essays for these classes are quite open-ended, with the topics mostly having to do with an in depth research of one of the field trip sites.

Outside of UCL, London is a city with endless potential. As we are conveniently located in Central London, with easy access to the tube station, it is quite easy to explore whatever aspects of the city appeal the most to you. Personally, I've really enjoyed the shopping experiences here, specifically in Borough Market, Oxford Street, and Camden Markets. The museums are all free, and are a popular destination if we are ever bored. The Imperial War Museum has been my personal favorite so far, with the largest WWI and WWII collection I've ever seen. Additionally, London nightlife is extremely vibrant and it is very easy to find a group of people in the dorm to enjoy it with.

Moving past just London, the best part of the study abroad experience is exploring Europe! One of my most memorable experiences was during my trip to Paris, when we walked 5 miles along the Seine River at 4 in the morning. It was amazingly beautiful, and we reached Notre Dame right as the sun rose over it, a truly spectacular sight. I've also been to Bath and Stonehenge, and currently have tickets booked for Naples, Capri, Florence, Rome, Iceland, Greece, Barcelona, Dublin, and Munich! We also have tickets to a FC Barcelona game while in Barcelona, a truly once in a lifetime experience.

There's something here for everyone; whether it be clubs and societies, backpacking across Europe, immersion in different cultures, students here can experience it all. I've barely scratched the surface of the endless possibilities, and hope to accomplish much more in my time here. Without a doubt, the decision to study abroad has been one of the best I've made at Caltech.

### **Dana Gephart '20 – Chemistry at UCL & Caltech**

Study abroad was one of those things that was always kind of present in the back of my mind throughout my freshman year. Whether it was through friends departing for a term or seeing

pictures on Facebook, I was always reminded that it was an option that I could pursue. I'm happy to say that the decision to apply for study abroad is one of the best ones I've made at Caltech. From the diverse societies, to the different teaching style, and even the city that the university is embedded in, UCL provides a vastly different learning experience that I've really enjoyed.

While being at a school with such a large student body was disorienting at first, I've come to realize that UCL's size provides the room to meet all sorts of people that I otherwise wouldn't have interacted with. I've made friends with people from all sorts of majors and nationalities and have pursued interests I thought I'd never have the chance to explore at Caltech in some of the societies here - I didn't expect to find a beekeeping society while I was here!

Another way that UCL differs from Caltech is their approach to their classes. For the most part there aren't mandatory problem sets; classes are usually graded on final exams alone or essays. That doesn't mean that the students here wait until the last minute to cram for their exams. They're normally taking notes of the material covered in class or doing optional problems; a habit that I've found myself picking up as well. In addition, the range of subjects that I've been able to choose from is kind of staggering. I enrolled in an introductory archaeology class and a week ago our lecture was held in a closed gallery in the British Museum! It would be next to impossible to find a class like that back home that wouldn't be packed full of students, but this was just for an introductory class!

Of course, I couldn't go without mentioning how wonderful it is to live in the heart of London. Being at the center of a huge, multicultural city is such a different experience than what I'd find at Caltech. Sure, Los Angeles is a melting pot in the same way that London is, but I'd often find myself wishing that everything was closer together when planning out a Saturday. That's not as much of a problem in London; the city is super walkable and if something is too far away to get to on foot the buses and the metro make it trivial to get to. Even the immediate neighborhood is full of things to do: The British Museum is only a 10 minute walk away from campus, and a few blocks past that is Soho and Chinatown. While I haven't taken the time to travel through Europe, I've found that London has more than enough to offer to fill all of my spare time and more.

Studying abroad has been a fantastic experience so far and I'd recommend anyone at Caltech to pursue it, especially at UCL. Where else can you go to a school that takes advantage of not only its large and varied departments, but also the incredible city that it's based in?

### **Ariel Stiber '20 - Chemical Engineering Caltech & Chemistry UCL**

I applied to study abroad at UCL for many reasons but a large one was the challenge of change. Studying at Caltech is an amazing experience but it is, as a small private university in the suburbs, a very isolated environment. I know and am very comfortable with my world at Caltech. But it is also unfortunately not extremely reflective of what I will experience leaving university. UCL presented me with an opportunity to explore something out of my comfort zone and it has exceeded my expectations in every way.

The teaching style at UCL is significantly different than at Caltech. My two chemistry classes do not have graded assignments during the term so my performance is fully dependent on final assessments done at the end of the term. This means I have a lot more independence and responsibility to control my own learning. I must hold myself responsible for doing the practice

problems and understanding the material even though my grades will not immediately reflect these efforts. Because the workload is lighter and is more self-organized I find that learning is less stressful here and I have a lot more time to fully understand concepts. The curriculum at UCL focuses significantly on application which complements Caltech's theory focused education. This method of teaching affords interesting assessments. For example, I have to write a paper for my Chemistry of Materials class.

My other two classes are London Architecture and Post-1945 European Literature. London Architecture is a history of art course. UCL offers these courses both in London Architecture and London Art and I highly suggest taking one of these two choices. In London Architecture, each week we meet at a different interesting building in London where the lecturer will take us through the history and meaning behind what we observe. I've really enjoyed this class so far and appreciate how it allows me to see so much of different areas of London. My Post-1945 European Literature (though vaguely titled) actually focuses on the very niche topic of crime fiction. The novels we read are mostly translations from different European countries. Because my class has students from all over the world, this results in some very interesting firsthand discussions of the places and events we read of. I've really enjoyed living and taking classes with people who aren't as STEM centered as in Caltech and who are so passionate about humanities.

Living in London there are countless things to do. The museums are all a short walk or tube ride away and are for the most part all free. In addition, there are countless markets to visit on the weekends that sell wares from handmade jewelry to olive oil. For food (besides markets) there are so many different options of amazing restaurants from all over the world. There is really no inaccessible place in the city. Living in Europe means that traveling both to other countries and around the UK is (unsurprisingly) significantly easier and cheaper than it would be from the US. Because I have more control over my academic schedule it is much easier to organize weekend trips. In the middle of the term (around midterms) UCL has something called reading week. This is a week intended for students to catch up on classes and in some cases take exams. However, generally students organize their time properly so they can travel for that week. For reading week I am going to Naples, Rome, and Florence. I am also planning on doing weekend trips both in other countries and around Britain.

Being in UCL has not only been a challenging and new experience, but also such an amazing opportunity to encounter different cultures and meet amazing people. It's an opportunity I highly recommend.

### **Arjun Zutshi '20 – Chemical Engineering Caltech & Chemistry UCL**

I am very glad I decided to study abroad at UCL. London is a great city with lots of culture and history. It is massive; however, most things are easy to reach via public transportation. What I really enjoy about London is that there is a wide variety of museums, which are all free. So far, I have visited the British Museum, Wellcome Collection and the Imperial War Museum. I feel that I am only scratching the surface. In terms of cuisine, the variety offered is impeccable. There are street food stands that are a 5-minute walk from UCL. They sell food from at least six different countries at a reasonable price. To add, I went to a fancy Indian restaurant that has a Michelin star, which is something you cannot find in LA. Overall, I am a big fan of London and prefer it to LA. I have never had a problem with safety, and I do not think I will in the future.

UCL is a bit different from Caltech. If you are looking for that, then it is a great place to study abroad. I find at UCL there are just as many lectures as Caltech, but they do not spam you with homework every week. In order to perform well in class, you have to self-study more than you would at Caltech. I find that I have more time to completely understand the concepts being taught because I am allowed to allocate time where I think would best benefit me.

From a non-academic perspective, UCL is also different from Caltech. Clubs and societies are more existent. I feel that the main reason for this is the class size relative to Caltech. UCL has around 20000 undergraduates. To add, people have more free time, so they can participate in these societies with worrying about falling behind on their coursework. I have joined one of the UCL football (soccer) teams. I am having a great time, and everyone seems very passionate about playing. Joining a society is an easy way to make friends. Most societies will hold socials every week. UCL prides them self on being a global university, so many of the students you will meet are not from the UK, which makes making friends even easier.

UCL has a reading week, which is meant for students to catch up on the work they have fallen behind on. If you are fortunate to be ahead on your work, like myself, you can use the week to travel. I will be spending the week in Italy with two other Caltech students. We will be spending time in Naples, Rome, and Florence. Weekends trips are also a possibility. I went to Paris one weekend and have planned trips to Spain, Greece, and Iceland. It might take some courage to step out of your comfort zone, but I believe that studying abroad is definitely worth it.