

# INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE

## HELPS STUDENTS EXPAND THEIR WORLDVIEW

CAL STATE LA'S FACULTY-LED **STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS** ARE PROVIDING NEW, ACCESSIBLE WAYS FOR STUDENTS TO EXPERIENCE THE BENEFITS OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION. THESE FLEXIBLE, SHORT-TERM PROGRAMS ALLOW STUDENTS TO EXPLORE UNIQUE DESTINATIONS WITH A GROUP OF THEIR FELLOW GOLDEN EAGLES, WITH WHOM THEY CAN SHARE DISTINCT HANDS-ON LEARNING EXPERIENCES THAT EXPAND BEYOND THE CLASSROOM. DESIGNED FOR STUDENTS WHO MAY PREFER THEIR ACCESSIBILITY FOR THEIR NEEDS, THESE MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PROGRAMS PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH THE GUIDANCE, INSTRUCTION AND SUPPORT OF UNIVERSITY FACULTY AND THEIR DEPARTMENTS.

Eleven Cal State LA undergraduate and graduate students representing diverse majors including social work, education, English, political science, geography, sociology and communication studies participated in the trip with a goal of expanding their professional skillset. By the close of the trip, participants had gained much more including cultural competence, humility, and a global perspective on each of their fields.

### REFLECTION AND OBSERVATION ABROAD

Prior to departure, Drs. Willis and Mattheis created several orientation modules including a cultural potluck dinner that allowed fellow Cal State LA students to meet and learn more about each other, and help their families prepare for their experience as well. "We asked students to begin communication with their assigned 'buddies' from UTCH and EAN via social media to facilitate bonding early on," says Dr Mattheis. "This made it possible for Cal State LA and Colombian students to comfortably share space with their hosts in and outside of class, and in specific group activities." Drs. Willis and Mattheis asked students to reflect critically in group sessions, in journals, and in their research projects; asking them to put in as much as they hoped to get out of the experience.

Dulce Perez, a Cal State LA student obtaining her bachelor of arts in social work, was surprised at the pace of life in Colombia as opposed to what she has experienced living and working in Los Angeles. "In Colombia, I came to realize how much more time people, even if they are strangers, spend interacting with each other," says Dulce. "I saw and experienced the beauty of humans treating each other as humans rather than not having the time to discover and appreciate one another."



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This year Tasha Willis, Ed.D. and Allison Mattheis, Ph.D. organized Cal State LA's first faculty-led program to Colombia in partnership with the Universidad Tecnológica del Chocó Diego Luis Córdoba (UTCH) in Quibdó and Universidad EAN (EAN) in Bogotá. "We wanted to expose students to new viewpoints beyond our campus," says Dr. Willis. "I think that for students and faculty alike, traveling and studying away from our home country challenges us to think beyond our normal confines and horizons."



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According to Drs. Willis and Mattheis, the Colombia project was designed with students at its core. The goal was to provide U.S. and Colombian students with a true intercultural exchange by having both groups interact daily. "Some short-term programs are not able to achieve this," says Dr. Willis. "Instead, U.S. students may travel overseas without sustained contact with people from their host communities due to the program design and logistics. In our case, we were fortunate that one of our host communities was able to create homestay experiences for our students."

#### Photos:

1 > Arrival day at Bogotá's El Dorado Airport.  
2 > Cal State LA Student Bri Dotson surrounded by friends from Quibdó on the Río Atrato.



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**Photos clockwise from top:**

- 1 > Cal State LA students attend the annual Study Abroad Fair.
- 2 > A student experiences henna body art at the Global Opportunities Fair.
- 3 > Students Vicky Silva, Hector Marrujo, Josue Lopez-Hernandez, Dulce Perez and Alejandra Olguin at a soccer stadium in Bogotá.
- 4 > Cal State LA and UTCH students having fun.

On a personal level, according to Dr. Willis, students and faculty participating in the experience all had different levels of travel and intercultural experience, allowing for growth and the opportunity to become more seasoned in terms of observing and adapting to differences in communication styles, access to familiar foods, and standards of living. “Academically and professionally, I think we all walked away inspired and curious about how to integrate these experiences into our life day-to-day back on campus and in our work environments,” says Dr. Willis.

**A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE**

Several weeks after returning from Colombia, students gathered for a final class session led by Drs. Willis and Mattheis. This provided an opportunity for students to reflect on their journey together, and how their education abroad is impacting their lives after the fact.

Six weeks later, at the Cal State LA Study Abroad Homecoming annual event, students shared with returnees from other destinations their thought on difficult situations and unexpected discoveries they came across while in Colombia, what they learned about others, and how this experience altered their future behaviors, attitudes, or career paths.

Several students are already seeking ways to return in professional contexts, including Dulce. “My trip abroad opened up a lot of new international opportunities for me,” she says. Dulce is applying to the Fulbright Scholarship Program to return to Colombia as an English Teaching Assistant, and is planning to complete a master’s degree in peace and conflict at the University of Medellín. “I want to help and empower the most vulnerable populations around the world, and lobby and advocate on their behalf. I feel a deep responsibility to do this.” □

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**TASHA WILLIS, Ed.D.**  
Assistant Professor of Social Work