

## Learning “On the Go” in Xi’an

### *Creating a Successful Experiential Learning Program at the University of Northern Colorado*

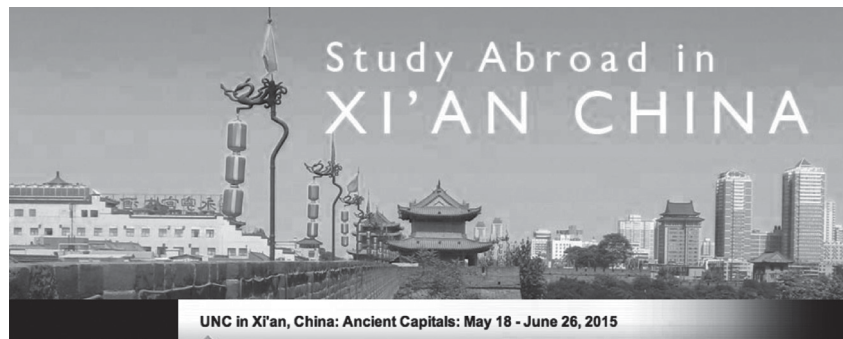
By Adam C. Fong and Michelle M. Low

Lost on their way to a famous Daoist temple in the city of Xi’an in north central China, a passing Chinese man pointed a group of visiting American students in the right direction. Another group of students went on a three-hour trip by train and public bus to visit an isolated but famous Buddhist cave

grotto in the countryside. Another group found a Chan/Zen Buddhist monastery in the heart of Xi’an that charges no admission fee and is unknown to many of the local residents. These are some of the experiences students from the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) had on last year’s summer faculty-led study abroad program to China, and it represents one way to approach and encourage experiential learning in Asia by American students.

Every other year, the UNC brings a group of approximately twenty students to Xi’an for a short-term, faculty-led study abroad (FLSA) program. Since the program’s inception in 2008, the total days students have been in China each summer has ranged from thirty-three to thirty-seven. The program aims to provide an affordable, intensive language immersion and meaningful cultural experience that will ultimately encourage students to continue their study abroad for a semester or a year. The program in 2013 was the fourth UNC trip and by far the most successful in terms of linguistic and cultural learning, as well as for individual student growth. UNC’s FLSA program in Xi’an generates word-of-mouth interest, and although we are still more than a year away from the next program, students are already asking about it. We attribute several different factors to the program’s continued success and sustainability, but the two most important factors are keeping students’ expenses low and constantly assessing and rethinking the program’s focus and approach.

UNC’s FLSA program is affordable for most if not all of UNC’s students. The program’s fees (tuition, housing, tours, insurance, and visa) total about \$3,000, and total program cost (international airfare, meals, expenses, spending money, and fees) is about \$5,000. To help keep the trip affordable, we have worked with an institution in China with which we have an exchange relationship, and while in Xi’an, we have stayed in its on-campus foreign student dormitories. We made classroom contact hours comply with the minimum UNC load of six credit hours per summer term so that students could qualify for half-time status and apply for financial aid to the program. Rather than go with a travel services provider, we planned the entire itinerary in Xi’an ourselves and rented a bus from the host university’s motor pool for group transportation during the four weeks in Xi’an.



Screen capture from the UNC website. Source: [http://www.unco.edu/cie/studyabroad/summer\\_china.html](http://www.unco.edu/cie/studyabroad/summer_china.html).

Instead of using a tour guide in Xi’an, we asked students to do pre-excursion research and readings about the sites from one of their required textbooks, the *Lonely Planet China Guide*. The faculty director provided historical and cultural background and context to the sites. For convenience in travel, we used a

tour company for the final end-of-program excursion.

Equally important as keeping the trip affordable, UNC’s FLSA program in China has made important adaptations that have helped it achieve its pedagogical goals. UNC’s first trip to Xi’an in 2008 had one faculty leader and fourteen students. While in Xi’an, our students engaged in four hours of language class daily and maintained journals, written in Chinese, about their visit. They also participated in weekly group tutorial lunches where they practiced new vocabulary and grammar and learned to navigate restaurants and menus successfully and confidently. The following year, in 2009, we added more structure to each journal entry by requiring them to include information about the weather, new foods eaten each day, and new vocabulary learned in class. We also added a weekly “special topics” essay, which asked students to go out into the community, interact with the culture and people, reflect upon their experiences, and interview a Chinese resident of Xi’an. Furthermore, we changed the end-of-program excursion to visit a different region each trip; for example, in 2009 we went up the Silk Road to Urumqi instead of returning to Beijing. However, there were only nine students in the 2009 cohort, including one returnee. Although the 2009 program was successful, we decided that in order to generate more excitement and increase enrollment, which would keep overall costs low, the program would go every other year.

In the interim, we also made several programmatic changes. One major change was to add a second linguistically and culturally competent faculty member to the program in order to help deal with the increased enrollment goal of twenty students. Another major change was to increase student cultural learning. While the “special topics” assessed students’ cultural learning, we wanted students to integrate the local tours and excursions into the overall learning experience so that these were not merely tourist excursions but culturally, historically, and thematically meaningful site visits. The program now had two different three-credit classes: one focused on language and the other focused on cultural knowledge. We changed the curriculum to three hours of language daily, followed by one hour of an interdisciplinary lecture course on Asian culture—particularly on the connections between Asian philosophies and religions, literature, history, and

art—called MIND 181, Great Traditions of Asia. The local excursions were integrated into the course. Each Saturday and one afternoon each week, we went on group excursions to various historical and cultural sites that corresponded with the topics in the MIND 181 course. For example, the unit on Daoism was accompanied by a group excursion during the week to a Daoist temple, Baxian An, and on the weekend to a Daoist mountain outside of town, Mt. Hua. The special topics assignment tied to this excursion was to interview a Chinese local about his views of nature or Daoist ideas. Finally, to further emphasize the academic nature of the program, students began class on campus at UNC in the week prior to departure. Both courses counted toward UNC general education requirements, so even non-majors could earn credits toward general graduation requirements.

We continued to make changes when designing the program for 2013. First, to establish our expectations clearly and to help students prepare themselves for living abroad, we had several mandatory predeparture meetings and began class several days before departure. We also changed the site visit format completely. Instead of having most of the site visits done in a large group with instructors present, students chose five sites from a list of suitable sites tied to the MIND 181 topics and visited them on their own. However, they were able to choose which sites to visit, when, and in what order they would visit them. Site visit reports were due on a regular schedule to encourage sustained visits throughout the program; students could not wait until the last weekend and attempt to visit all five sites. The returning students, who could not retake the MIND 181 class, were instead enrolled in a different course that emphasized research in Chinese. As part of that class, they were assigned to act as guides for their fellow students on at least one of their site visits. This student-led excursion allowed those students with lower language proficiency to have at least one opportunity to travel with a more experienced classmate and learn how to get around. The addition of this new course allowed students to take the program multiple times, which helped promote long-term sustainability of the program. The end-of-program excursion, this time to Nanjing, Hangzhou, and Suzhou, remained a group activity, which served as a way to assess the effectiveness of the experiential learning, since we could compare how students reacted to sites at both the beginning and end of the program. Students could also self-assess their progress and learning from the program through this comparison. To further assess the effectiveness of the program, a postprogram evaluation was also made available to the students once they had returned to the US.

These changes in 2013 were extremely successful in promoting cross-cultural learning, improved language skills, and increased critical awareness among our students. We found that students appreciated the free time to explore at their own pace and that their written work vastly outperformed the written work from previous years. The students showed greater insight and deeper reflection on cultural and linguistic issues, and much greater personal growth. It seems that giving them a choice encouraged students to carefully consider what they might learn from one site as opposed to another. Indeed, many of them researched the sites beforehand, not just in the assigned *Lonely Planet* but also through the Internet and other sources. Without instructors to plan the logistics, students needed to improve their map reading skills and often resorted to asking for directions from local people, thus practicing their language skills. Consciously or unconsciously, the majority of students wrote site visit reports that corresponded to the philosophical traditions discussed that week. Therefore, the planned synchronicity, developed for the 2011 program, remained at least as strong in 2013 but with perhaps less demands on the faculty.

Based on the success of the 2013 program, future UNC FLSA programs to China will return to Xi'an as a home base; include both the language course and the culture-based course; and continue to include predeparture orientations and classes, group and individual excursions, and student-led site visits. Several of the 2013 cohort are planning to return individually to China for study abroad or internship programs, and all have been inspired to continue their study of Chinese language and culture. In future programs, we hope to see students continue to rise to the challenges of living and functioning abroad and to be active participants in a target culture, rather than merely tourists. ■

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