I. Host Institution and City

Los Angeles is a cosmopolitan city located on the West coast of the United States. It is next to Mexico as well as other big cities in the United States, such as San Francisco and Las Vegas. The weather is generally warm and very comfortable from September to December. One thing to note is that the temperature at night can be a lot lower than that in the afternoon.

Ranked 10th in the World Reputation Rankings in 2014, University of California, Los Angeles is one with a huge and diverse population size. In 2013, there are about 42000 students in total. About one-third of the newly enrolled students are Asians, another one-third are whites, and the other students from all around the world. It also has a very beautiful and relaxing campus which provides an ideal environment for students to study.

II. Academic experience

The usual number of units to be taken in UCLA is 12-19, while one class usually takes up around four to five units.

I took four classes during my semester in UCLA, namely Arab uprisings, cities of Europe, introduction to international and area studies, and freedom of communication. Among them, Arab uprising was a fiat lux seminar, which was designed for freshman with undecided major to try out classes of particular topics. This kind of classes takes up only one unit and has only one hour of seminar each week. Also, letter grade is not provided – students get only pass or no pass for this kind of classes. However, for Arab uprisings, there was in fact no freshman in the class. Most of the students were new transfer students who were interested in the topic and wanted to engage in deep investigation with the professor and other classmates in a small class – only less than twenty people in my case. It was a very special experience in which students were welcome to speak on and to discuss the assigned readings each week. While very comprehensive knowledge of the topic might not be provided due to very limited contact hours (only an hour a week), it developed my interest in current affairs in the Middle East.

Introduction to international and area studies was an introductory class as well as a general education class (similar to common core classes in HKU) for everyone interested in the topic to take. It covered many important concepts in political theories in brief. I would recommend this course to students who are interested to
get to know about international studies.

Freedom of communication was as well a very interesting class. Under the communication studies department, freedom of communication was in fact a class very much related to law. It led students to examine the freedom of speech in a completely legal perspective, rather than a general one. In the class, students will read many actual and prominent law cases in the United States and learn the rules and criteria to determine whether certain acts breached the law or not. It does not require students to have any legal knowledge beforehand and would be a very interesting class to anyone interested in legal studies.

In terms of the learning environment, I find students in UCLA tend to be more active in answering questions as well as in asking them. The teaching and learning model is therefore more interactive when compared to traditional Chinese ones, where students are usually not used to answer or ask questions in class, even when the professors invited responses.

III. Dorm life

Dorm life had been one of the best aspects of my exchange. Despite I put classic residence hall as my top preference when I applied, I ended up getting in Rieber Terrace, a residential plaza. Yet, I was not upset about this at all as I made a couple of really close friends living in Rieber Terrace.

One of the best things about living on campus is that you would meet a lot of other students and can get close with them more easily as you would see each other almost every day. I lived in a triple room with a Korean roommate and an Indian American roommate. Both of them were very nice. I also made friends of other nationalities on my floor, including Vietnamese, African, French and more. I even met another exchange student who came from Maldives!

Besides, there are often some activities organized for students living on campus. Some activities aim to help students to get used to the school environment and resources, which can be quite useful to exchange students like us. Also, you can always reach help more easily as residential assistants are right next door to you. There are two residential assistants on each floor, who are usually senior students that are very helpful and take care of other student residents.

Having a meal plan is another advantage for living in dorms. Since there is no
kitchen in dorms, students have to eat in the school’s dining halls most of the time.

UCLA is known for serving good food. As I heard from some friends, there has been an unofficial data that says UCLA ranks second among other US colleges for food, which I guess could likely be true – the food the dining halls serve was so good that I felt like I was having meals in a hotel. There are four buffet-style dining halls and two cafés. The menus of the dining halls rotate weekly or biweekly, but the salads, fruits and desserts are always there.

Meal plans must be purchased together as a package when students apply for hall. I had the most basic meal plan – 11 meals a week. It may not sound reasonable, but since sometimes I would eat out or simply have a quick meal at fast food shops next to the classrooms, the plan 11 meals a week was suitable for me.

One thing to note is that the classrooms may not be as close as you may think. It usually took me fifteen to twenty minutes to go to classes from the dorm.

IV. Culture

UCLA seems to place its emphasis on whole-person development, and the students are moving along the line. There are numerous student clubs and societies – you can almost find one, or sometimes more than one, for whatever areas you are interested in. Students also tend to put more attention on sports and exercises. There is a gym located in a very convenient location on campus, and it is always full. You would often notice people dressing in sportswear and running around the campus when you go to or from classes. In fact, encouraged by my friends, I started running regularly too. We ran once or twice every week, which was not only good for our mood and body but was also a really enjoyable experience.

V. Conclusion

Overall, the exchange has been invaluable experiences for me in which I have gain some precious and life-long friendships through living and studying in UCLA. The quarter I spent in UCLA has been one of the most joyful times I have had in college. I am grateful to have the opportunity to have gone on this exchange. Gratitude must also go to Mr. Lam, whose generosity has eased the financial burden of the exchange.