

## Ideas from a Vibrant Liberal Arts High School in Myanmar

By Helen Waller, Dorothy Guyot, and Win Kyaw

For twelve years, the Pre-Collegiate Program of Lumbini Academy has been integrating Myanmar high school graduates into a liberal arts life style. Since its inception, the mission of the Pre-Collegiate Program has been to nurture a small cohort of change-makers each and every year. We are looking to foster students to become perceptive, empathetic, critical, capable, and proactive in engaging the society around them. The first step is sixteen months of education to empower the students to abandon the rote learning of their high school years, and to engage issues and ideas important to their society and the wider world. As the second step, our graduates have matriculated to sixty-seven liberal arts colleges, five US universities, two Canadian universities, three preparatory schools on full scholarships, eight Asian universities, and five European universities. The generosity of these institutions in scholarships is immense, between US \$1 and \$2 million every year. The third step is the return home of the globally educated students. In this article, we sketch how students learn in the program, how the graduates contribute at college, and how the program facilitates study abroad. How a similar program might be opened under restricted circumstances elsewhere in Asia is explained in the sidebar that accompanies this essay.

Our curriculum provides humanities and social science courses—philosophy, literature, and history—as a counterbalance to years of a science-privileging education. We also provide an integrated science class to help students grasp concepts that weave together the facts that they crammed for years. Students take biweekly field trips, contribute weekly community service, hold discussions with people from all walks of life, and host university students from Japan and professionals from America. Peer learning ranges from joint field reports and in-class debates to countless lunchtime conversations on everything from the meaning of life to the efficacy of the new flyover. Teachers and alumni are readily available as additional resources to discuss the students' questions, which include, but are not limited to:

- How do we interview the kids who collect plastic when they think we're city officials?
- How do I persuade my mother that I can ride the bus?
- Have I paraphrased the text adequately?
- What college should I attend?
- What if I find a new life interest while I'm in college?
- What do you say when people criticize our country as backward?

The many elements of the program working together enable students to grow in their investment in the world around them. This becomes evident while they are students. It is also observed by their mentors at internships, their professors and peers at college, and their coworkers at their jobs upon their return. Upon entering college, our graduates are immediately able to enter into cross-cultural comparisons in class and in the dorms. Americans who get into conversation with our graduates discover a different worldview. Here are a few recollections of our students:

*Hello, my name is May Pwint Thair Chu. Please call me May Pwint. Hello, May. I can't pronounce Pwint. I also think I won't remember it. I will call you May. Friends, this is Ms. Chu. Thank you for the introduction. My name is May Pwint. Well, it is easier to remember your last name. I don't have a last name. I have four syllables in my whole name.*

Ma May Pwint Thair Chu: Roanoke College

*At college, I held meditation sessions open to all, five days a week. When my friends saw me in the dining hall, they realized that I skip the veggies and eat lots of meat. They named me, "Here is the meat-eating monk."*

Maung Aung Phone Myint: Bates College

*During my first-year writing class, we were talking about how America is peculiar in using the mile as a unit of measurement despite the global switch to the kilometer. I said, "We still use the mile to calculate distance in Burma. See, there are two."*

Maung Zaw Linn Htet: Denison University

*I asked my host mom and dad why they let their cat sleep with them but not their three-year-old.*

Ma Ei Thant Sin: Randolph College

*Lots of Americans are upset over things they can't control. The day when Joe Biden was supposed to be our college guest speaker, Hurricane Sandy hit. My friends kept complaining that he should have at least dropped by. I couldn't get them to calm down.*

Ma Swe Zaw Oo: Green Mountain College

Screen capture of the Lumbini Pre-collegiate Academy website home page at <http://www.precollegiate.org/index.php>.

## RESOURCES

### TEACHING RESOURCES ESSAYS

**Figure 1. Colleges Where Pre-Collegiate Graduates Are Studying**

<b>Bard College (NY)</b>	<b>Li Po Chun, United World College* (UWC) of Hong Kong</b>
<u>Beloit College (WI)</u>	
Berea College (IL)	Monmouth College (IL)
Brenau College (KY)	<b>Morehouse College (GA)</b>
<u>Bucknell University (PA)</u>	<b>Northwestern University (IL)</b>
Chinese University of Hong Kong	<b>Ohio Wesleyan</b>
Colby-Sawyer College (NH)	Randolph College (VA)
Colgate University (NY)	Roanoke College (VA)
<b>College of St. Elizabeth (NJ)</b>	Science Po, Le Havre (France)
College of the Atlantic (ME)	<u>The University of the South (TN)</u>
<b>College of the Atlantic UWC (Wales)</b>	Simon Fraser University (Canada)
<b>College of Wooster (OH)</b>	<b>Skidmore College (NY)</b>
Concordia College (AL)	Smith College (MA)
Davidson College (NC)	St. John's, Annapolis (MD)
Denison University (OH)	St. John's, Santa Fe (NM)
<u>Dickinson College (PA)</u>	St. Olaf College (MN)
Dominican University of California	Swarthmore College (PA)
<u>Franklin &amp; Marshall College (PA)</u>	Trinity College (CT)
Furman University (SC)	Union College (NY)
Green Mountain College (VT)	<b>University of Evansville (IN)</b>
Grinnell College (IA)	University of Hong Kong
Illinois Wesleyan University	<u>University of Richmond (VA)</u>
Jacobs University (Germany)	<u>University of South Wales (UK)</u>
Kenyon College (OH)	University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point
Lafayette College (PA)	<b>Vassar College (NY)</b>

\*United World Colleges (UWC) is an education movement comprising 15 international schools and colleges, national committees in more than 140 countries, and a series of short educational programs.

If some of our alumni study at your college or nearby, they would enjoy helping you make Asia come alive for your students. Figure 1 is a list of the colleges where our students are currently enrolled. Bold type indicates that our alumni graduate in 2015, while an underline means that they will enter in 2015.

In myriad ways, our graduates have contributed intercultural insights into the courses they take. Many professors have invited them as resource people or guest speakers in courses on Asian religions, comparative politics, development economics, and anthropology. Our graduates have written feature articles in campus newspapers and articles in college literary journals. They have selected films for campus showings and have been interviewed for college radio stations. One even worked as a DJ, adding his Burmese perspective about the music he played. The courses students take in the Pre-Collegiate Program empower students to be ready to cooperate in ways they never dreamed possible. Figure 2 is a typical schedule early in a student's first term.

In the past decade, it has become evident that the Pre-Collegiate Program is a learning community that is able to benefit students and faculty not in the Pre-Collegiate Program and add to their knowledge of Myanmar. For example, the program has twelve years' experience in hosting students on the Learning Across Borders trips led by Dwight Clark, who founded Volunteers in Asia (VIA) in 1963. He visits Yangon in Myanmar annually with about twenty-five university students from Keio, Waseda, and Tokyo universities (Japan); National Taiwan University; and Chulalongkorn University (Thailand) on a two-week study trip designed to give profound cross-cultural experiences to all participants. Pre-Collegiate Program students escort the visitors in Yangon, visiting community service sites, tourist spots, markets, and other cultural and commercial places. These venues plus lunches and dinners together encourage wide-ranging conversations and, for some, continuing friendships. Dwight welcomes inquiries at [dwight-cla@gmail.com](mailto:dwight-cla@gmail.com).



The class tussles over whether the causes of the Opium Wars are better understood as supply side or demand side. Photo by program student.



Preparing students for a week's investigation in Bagan, Dr. Than Tun Maung shows a libation jar from a site he discovered near Dhammayangyi Temple. Photo by program student.

## RESOURCES

### TEACHING RESOURCES ESSAYS

Figure 2. A Typical Weekly Schedule for the Pre-Collegiate Program in 2015

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9:00 – 10:00 Literature	9:00 – 12:00 Service	9:00 – 10:00 Literature	Field Trip	9:00 – 10:30 Integrated Sciences
10:10 – 11:40 Integrated Science		10:10 – 11:10 Philosophy		10:40 – 11:40 Literature
11:40 – 13:00 Lunch		11:20 – 12:20 Community Meeting		11:40 – 13:00 Lunch
13:10 – 14:10 Service Prep	12:00 – 13:20 Lunch	12:20 – 13:40 Lunch		13:10 – 14:10 Newsroom
14:20 – 15:20 Student Council	13:30 – 14:30 American History	13:50 – 14:50 Touchstones		14:20 – 15:20 American History
15:30 – 16:30 American History	14:40 – 15:40 SAT Prep	15:00 – 16:00 Field Trip Prep		15:30 – 16:30 Philosophy
	15:50 – 16:50 Philosophy			
		Speaker		

Wesley Hedden, a former teacher at the Pre-Collegiate Program, has created the Sarus Exchange Program. This NGO is a unique form of intercultural learning that draws on the experiences of VIA and of the Pre-Collegiate Program. Sarus educates small groups of Cambodian and Vietnamese university students about issues in their own countries through weekend trips to investigate features of their societies, ranging from orphan care to mangrove replanting. Then, Sarus brings the two nationalities together to learn by site visits and working on a tangible project, such as building a school. Hedden was teaching in the Pre-Collegiate Program when he first got to see and evaluate the applicability of many of the learning activities he still uses today. He welcomes exchanges at [wesleyhedden@gmail.org](mailto:wesleyhedden@gmail.org), and for further information about Sarus, visit <http://sarusprogram.org/our-staff/>.

So what is the takeaway from all this? It is that education like the Pre-Collegiate Program can enable a cascade of learning opportunities for people in a variety of situations around the world. The energy and time put in by the teachers and students of the Pre-Collegiate Program can result in dramatic changes in learning. While in Myanmar, students figure out how to learn on a field trip to a garment factory, while working with an American engineer, and at a school for blind children. At universities abroad, they engage with their peers in personal, poignant, and creative ways. With a formative approach tailored to the academic realities and needs of a particular society, the Pre-Collegiate Program has succeeded in educating part of the world about contemporary Myanmar. We anticipate that Myanmar society will benefit from these graduates for years to come.



Impromptu games with orphans are a joyous mode of weekly service. Photo by program student.



Cooperation is the theme whether in a classroom or in a mangrove stand on the Bago River. Photo by program student.

## Six Principles of Success of the Pre-Collegiate Program That Could Be Transferable

(Developed Progressively and Written Down in 2008)

### 1. Protection from capricious governmental repression by appearing insignificant.

- Inconspicuous inside the Diplomatic School, the program appears from the outside to be an ordinary part of the school serving mixed Myanmar and foreign children.
- The program is known and respected by high-level civilians in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in the Ministry of Education.
- We keep out of the media in Myanmar. Only once did a newspaper article appear, covering our planting mangrove trees in cooperation with an NGO.
- We exclude political subjects from our curriculum.
- We self-censor our email messages unless we use secure channels.

### 2. Protection from capricious government through the connections of friends of the program.

- Daw Myo Myint, Principal of the Diplomatic School, is respected by high-level officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Dr. Khin Maung Win, Head of the Program, is beloved by high-level officials in the Ministry of Education.
- An ever-expanding circle of graduates and their parents look out for the welfare of the Program.

### 3. A system for attracting highly qualified students.

- Since 2005, we have attracted students to free Saturday morning discussions and talks by students who chose topics ranging from global warming to child labor in India to Einstein.
- Our current students and graduates draw like-minded students.
- We give presentations at the monthly meetings of the association of teachers.
- We have revised a Touchstones Discussion book to get past the censors that teaches cooperative and critical thinking. (See [www.touchstones.org](http://www.touchstones.org).)
- During the recruitment season, our students and faculty visit schools and universities.

### 4. A flexible curriculum to strengthen students intellectually and ethically.

- For example, from two days after Cyclone Nargis struck on May 2, 2008, our students were involved in helping clear debris and providing relief. They were led in these efforts by two young American faculty members with a can-do approach.
- We faculty members are all aware of ideas introduced by our colleagues in other courses. Integration of knowledge is new to our students who come from a segmented system of rote learning.
- We keep enrollment small to enable all students to develop their potential.

### 5. A system of winning scholarships from American and other universities.

- We keep abreast of which colleges and universities are generous in giving scholarships to international students.
- We advise students individually on which colleges are likely to award them scholarships.
- Because our graduates are proactive students and effective cultural ambassadors, colleges welcome subsequent applicants.

### 6. A system of motivating the graduates to return home to engage in the development of their country.

- Through ten months of service and four months of internship, our students take responsibilities in their society.
- Through weekly talks on a wide range of issues by Myanmar nationals who are talented enough to have careers abroad, our students discover role models.
- Our graduates are in touch with each other and motivate each other to return.
- The two grandsons of Dr. Khin Maung Win have both returned after college education for careers in Myanmar. Our students regard them as older brothers.
- We consider our program as running six years because we help students find meaningful work when they return for summers and after college.

The Pre-Collegiate Program would not have begun without advice from John Badgley, a Burma hand who first knew the country in the 1950s as a PhD student, and U Ba Win. Now Vice-President of Bard College, U Ba Win has decades of educational experience in cross-cultural teaching and learning. When Myanmar was closed to the world, he led Yangon high school students to upper Myanmar to experience their country in ways entirely new to them. In 2000, he and Badgley spent three days with Jim and Dorothy Guyot working through the design of the Pre-Collegiate Program. Their ideas were appropriate to the needs of Myanmar, and the program retains the basic form they designed. They have helped make the program a strong access point for learners moving between Myanmar and the rest of the world. Both welcome email inquiries: [johnbadgley8@gmail.com](mailto:johnbadgley8@gmail.com) and [bawin@simons-rock.edu](mailto:bawin@simons-rock.edu).

The principles list above takes up the big question of whether the success of the Pre-Collegiate Program can inform bridging projects in other Asian countries. In 2008, when Myanmar's military government was blocking foreign relief for the people devastated by Cyclone Nargis,

**Figure 3. What Are the Pre-Collegiate Program Graduates Doing Today?** (Figures from 2015)

Working at paying jobs in Myanmar	53
Working at paying jobs in the United States	16
Working at paying jobs in Canada and Nepal	2
Looking for work	1
Earning a PhD degree	7
Earning a Master's degree	11
Earning a Bachelor's degree in the United States	60
Earning a Bachelor's degree in Europe or Asia	3
<b>TOTAL GRADUATES</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>Number winning scholarships abroad</b>	<b>144</b>



Students discover eighteen species of insects, worms, and spiders in the soil of a rubber plantation. Photo by program student.



A student waits for a ferry to cross the Yangon River at the start of an overnight trip to an isolated village. Photo by program student.



Students learn about the staple crop of the country, rice, right before the harvesting season. Photo by program student.



After a day's trek near Kalaw, students and teacher write poems in a Pa-O home. Photo by program student.

Dorothy Guyot sketched the six principles of the program. These ideas could inform efforts in other dictatorships to prepare youths for university abroad for education in ways that motivate them to return home. The ideas are left as they were expressed under the dictatorship, although now there is no need to hide. ■

We invite you to visit our webpage at [www.precollegiate.org](http://www.precollegiate.org). Readers who wish to correspond about this article can reach Helen Waller at [precollegiate@gmail.com](mailto:precollegiate@gmail.com) and Dorothy Guyot at [dguyot@aya.yale.edu](mailto:dguyot@aya.yale.edu).

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**HELEN WALLER** has been a teacher of the Pre-Collegiate Program for three years. A New Orleans native who finished at Carleton College, she looks forward to a continued legacy of learning at the Pre-Collegiate Program.

**DOROTHY GUYOT** became acquainted with Burma during her PhD research on the political impact of the Japanese occupation. A life member of AAS, she has served on the Southeast Asia Council. Her commitment to integrated learning stems from earning a Hutchins degree at the University of Chicago and teaching at St. John's College, Annapolis.

**WIN KYAW** is a twelfth wave student of the Pre-Collegiate Program who will be joining Bucknell University for undergraduate studies this fall.