



EVEN NOW, INTERNATIONAL LEARNING IS STILL POSSIBLE

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

Phi Kappa Phi has long recognized the academic value of travel with its generous study abroad scholarships. Generations of students have benefited from the opportunity to learn and make friends abroad and have returned to their home countries with wider horizons.

Although travel has been restricted by the pandemic, there are still opportunities for international learning. Many young people are now virtually attending colleges that are worlds away from their homes and forging new academic friendships in the process.

Last September, I was stunned, for example, to learn that Hazel, one of my new advisees, was Zooming into first-year orientation from her house in Limbe, Cameroon. Navigating remote learning has been an education for both of us, as I struggle to explain American university lingo — credit hours, general education, placement testing — while she copes with intermittent electricity and the challenges of a five-hour time difference from Massachusetts to West Africa.

We talk twice a month by videoconference, scheduling our appointments carefully due to the time zones between us and Hazel's lack of internet access at high-traffic hours. Sometimes she joins me from her living room, sometimes from an outbuilding with a corrugated roof. I often hear a rooster in the background.

My talks with Hazel have reminded me of the value of long-distance friendships and the learning opportunities they offer. She shows me photographs of her elderly father and explains that she has siblings who are decades older than her. As I listen, I learn how Cameroon is handling COVID-19, how the threat of genocide is affecting her family, and why she hopes to come to the United States to finish her degree.

Intercontinental friendships have long been formed by correspondence between students in far-flung countries. Before travel became affordable and commonplace, savvy teachers linked their classes by mail across international borders so their students could practice new languages and learn about life in other lands.

Before World War II, Anne Frank and her sister had pen pals in Danville, Iowa, a farm town near the Mississippi River. As instructed by their teachers, the girls wrote letters to each other in English, and Anne sent a picture postcard of

Amsterdam. Danville now honors the memory of Anne's correspondence with her Iowa pen pal at a museum displaying their letters. Today's students have embarked on a project to collect 1.5 million postcards from pen pals around the world—one for each child who died in the Holocaust, as did Anne and her sister. Their lessons of friendship resound beyond the evil regime that took their lives.

With careful effort, teachers can continue to foster long-distance friendships, despite the challenges of our current moment in history. Online networks such as PenPal Schools offer connections to foreign countries for K-12 students, and college professors can use their own contacts or direct students to services like the College Pen Pal Program, started by the University of South Florida to combat social isolation during the pandemic. Students still have much to learn about the world beyond their borders, perhaps never more so than right now.



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