Research, Perspective, & Teakettles: Looking back on my year as a Clark Scholar

Before becoming a Clark Scholar, Australia was to me a vast continent rising out of the oceans of the Southern Hemisphere, populated by odd animals and people who spoke a strange form of the Queen's English. After about a year of studying Australian politics and a month in the country, my assessment of Australia’s quirkiness hasn't changed much. In fact, in many ways it was reinforced. I learned in Australia, for example, that you need to know the difference between linguistic curiosities such as "aavo" (avocado) and "ahhvo" (afternoon), to say "ashume" instead of assume, and to be aware that kangaroo boxing fights can often spread into suburban lawns and driveways. What has changed over the past year, however, is nearly everything else: my understanding of Australia's people and culture, my knowledge of the country's unique parliamentary system, and my perspective on my own strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities as I enter my final semesters as an undergraduate.

From the beginning of my time as a Clark Scholar, I found myself traveling headfirst into the trials and triumphs of political science research. Developing a research question, finding data that might answer that question, and deciding on methods by which to test my hypotheses proved more difficult, and more rewarding, than I could have expected. With the help of faculty mentors like Dr. Rhonda Evans and Dr. Brian Roberts, supportive graduate students, and my fellow Clark Scholar, Maureen Clark, my project examining business lobbying in the Australia grew from a nascent idea to a successful paper presented at a series of undergraduate research events. By the end of the experience, I came away with several research grant awards, new ideas for future research, and a strong sense of what rigorous social science looks like.
Dedication, I realized, was key to progressing from the gritty beginning stages to the flashy exhibition stage of an academic study.

If working on my own project opened my eyes to the struggles and payoffs of undergraduate research, living and working in Australia for a month exposed me to many of the realities of post-graduate adult life. Notwithstanding choking through electrical-smoke after mistakenly placing an electric tea kettle on the stove and relying on the kindness of Aussie strangers to jump a rental car's battery at a bustling evening market in Darwin, most of my time was full of non-threatening, yet educational, experiences. Hearing feedback from Australian scholars after presenting my research and working with Dr. Evans and Maureen to hunt through countless archives and libraries to find a seemingly simple list of High Court judicial salaries further enhanced my understanding of the messy, collaborative nature of research. Spending time with Australian students (who showed us kangaroos, wild!) and learning more about the country's history and culture in the museums, parks, streets, and cinemas of Canberra helped round out my experience as a Clark Scholar.

Now, as I prepare to end my undergraduate career at UT, quantifying my time with the Clark Center is difficult. More than the research and presentation skills, more than knowledge about the people and unique politics of a country halfway around the world, I'm left with renewed confidence about my personal and professional future. The Australians often say, in response to an apology or a potentially tricky social situation, the simple phrase "no worries." In my own life, I'm not quite there yet. I'm glad, though, that at least some of Australians' charming, casual oddness rubbed off and informed my outlook. Just don't ask me to operate an electric teakettle.