

Utahn wins prestigious scholarship to study in the U.K.

Higher education • Son of immigrants, Dixon Li credits extracurricular activities for success.

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A Utah native who has won a prestigious scholarship to study in the United Kingdom says it wasn't core classes in math, science or language arts that best equipped him.

Rather, it was extracurricular activities that helped Dixon Li succeed at Princeton University and now, prepare to study for two master's degrees in England.

Core classes give students information, but not necessarily the ability to think critically, said Li, who graduated from Skyline High School in 2010 and is home in Sandy on Christmas break.

He had plenty of attention from teachers, but the curriculum was often boring, he said.

Debate as well as classes at Spy Hop Production and working as a deejay at KRCL taught him to articulate his thoughts and to do research, Li said.

Skyline's Spanish and French clubs and service groups like Key Club and Operation Smile were also helpful, said the 22-year-old.

Extracurricular activities "let you start thinking about how you can fulfill your own projects."

Li, who will graduate in English from Princeton University in the spring, was recently picked for one of 34 Marshall Scholarships, which will pay for two years of graduate work in the United Kingdom.

Named for former U.S. Secretary of State George C. Marshall, the Marshall Scholarship Program was begun in 1953 to thank Americans for helping the U.K. via the Marshall Plan, after World War II.

"Winners of the Marshall Scholarship embody the highest academic and leadership ideals of the U.S., and it is clear that Dixon belongs in that elite group," said British Consul-General Chris O'Connor, in a news release.

"The most talented young minds in America compete fiercely for this honour [sic] and go on to become some of the most influential figures in American public life across the board."

Each year, up to 40 American students are picked for the scholarship. Patrick Bryne, founder of Utah's Overstock.com, is listed in the news release as one of the previous recipients.

Li's parents had always wanted to come to the United States.

After the Chinese government cracked down on the pro-democracy movement in 1989, killing scores of student protesters in Tiananmen Square, the U.S. government offered Chinese doctoral students studying in the United States a green card. It was a sign of solidarity with the students, Li said.

Brandon Li, Dixon's father, was taking English lessons from a Mormon missionary couple in China, and they hooked him up with a University of Utah professor who gave him a place in the U. physiology doctoral program. He already had been teaching physiology for a Chinese medical school.

He came in 1989, and Dixon's mother, Joy Wu, came the next year. Dixon was born in December 1991 at St. Mark's Hospital; his older brother, who had stayed in China with grandparents, came when he was 4.

Brandon Li later left his job as a lab technician at the U. and has worked various jobs, including with Wu, who has had several restaurants and now owns Burger House in South Towne Center in Sandy.

"Dixon was extraordinary from the very beginning," said Shannalee Otanez, who taught him in Loud and Clear Youth Radio, a part of



Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune Dixon Li is a senior at Princeton University and Utah native who has just won the prestigious Marshall Scholarship to study in the United Kingdom.

Spy Hop Productions in Salt Lake City. “He had such a love for writing, storytelling and music.”

She is also a deejay at KRCL, where Li volunteered as a deejay and interned with Troy Williams and his RadioActive show.

Spy Hop, she said, offers students another way of learning, which Li thrived upon.

“In traditional school settings, they don’t always get the opportunity to explore their voices,” she said.

At Queen Mary University of London next year, Li will study for a master’s degree in contemporary writing and culture. In his second year, he hopes to work on a creative project at Goldsmiths College at the University of London.

Li’s graduate work at Queen Mary will revolve around reparation for those who feel emotionally hurt by racism, classism, sexism or other discrimination.

“What are ways you can repair a community that has been discriminated against? After racism, what is the proper response for a government or even a neighbor to help address your suffering?” he explained.

Ultimately, through writing and teaching, he’d like to help people understand that their words and actions can deeply affect others and that it’s their business to repair damage.

“Social healing is something the government is never going to do for you,” said Li. “It’s something you have a responsibility to do in your daily life.”

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