

Outstanding in the Field

BY SHERRIE NEGREA

Before setting foot in southern India three years ago, Jessica Sparling '13 was dead-set on becoming a physician in her rural hometown in Ontario, Canada. But after spending eight weeks developing health pamphlets and a calendar promoting yoga, diet, and exercise at an isolated hospital, Sparling's ideas about herself and her future changed.

"It was kind of thrust upon me—the idea to be introspective and reflect on who I am, what's important to me, and what I'm passionate about," said Sparling, who arrived as a sophomore in Kenchanahalli as part of a new field experience offered by Human Ecology and the Cornell ILR Office of International Programs. "I met myself in India, and that was really powerful. I learned so much about people and the world that first summer."

While working in a ten-bed hospital, Sparling, a nutritional sciences major, realized that a traditional career in medicine no longer suited her interests. A new world opened up to her, and after spending the following summer in Zambia, Sparling now plans to pursue a master's degree in public health, a field "I didn't know existed before my summer in India."

Launched in 2007, the College of Human Ecology's Global Health Program is attracting a growing number of Cornell students who are looking for an international experience that allows them to apply their classroom learning to real-world problems facing resource-poor regions. Sponsored by the Division of Nutritional Sciences, the minor has become so popular that a new major in Global and Public Health Sciences will begin this fall.

More than 100 students are on the waiting list for the program's three-credit introductory course, drawn by its emphasis on experiential learning, said program director Rebecca Stoltzfus, professor of nutritional sciences and provost's fellow for public engagement. "This generation of students is really interested in applying problem-solving knowledge," she said. "Global Health students want to see how their learning and knowledge applies to real-world problems."

With 68 students completing their field experiences this year, the Global Health minor offers one of the largest study-abroad programs for undergraduates at Cornell. Open to any undergraduate across campus, the Global Health minor will be a lynchpin in President David Skorton's goal, announced this spring, for 50 percent of undergraduates to study abroad by 2020, said Marina Markot, director of Cornell Abroad.

"By making the Global Health field experience a requirement closely supervised by the faculty, the program assures the quality of the students' experiences while also helping the university reach President Skorton's ambitious goal," Markot said. >>>



Jessica Sparling '13 says she "learned so much about people and the world" during her field experience in India. Photo provided.

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Global Health student Vanessa Rivera '14 (right) and a classmate visited clinics in Peru and Ecuador to support the health of new mothers and infants. Photo provided.



For his field experience, Chris Caruso '14 spent eight weeks alongside University of Zambia medical students. The group addressed community health problems affecting impoverished rural villages. Photo provided.

Leading Positive Change

Unlike many study-abroad programs, the Global Health minor offers students the opportunity to participate in international engagement, which Skorton defined in a 2012 white paper as “utilizing education, research, and academic partnership to effect positive change in the world.” This type of experience complements international studies, which Skorton defined as “understanding the world and its peoples.”

This distinction has fueled growing student interest in the Global Health Program, Stoltzfus said. “There are many students who are more interested in experiential, applied global learning than in the traditional concept of study abroad, where you go to a foreign university and sit in classes,” she added. “Our field experiences are ones where students will spend some time in coursework, but the majority of the time, they are rolling up their sleeves and doing some sort of service-learning or internship. That seems to appeal to students much more than spending all their time in a classroom setting.”

Launched in 2007, the Global Health Program promises to be a lynchpin in President David Skorton’s goal for 50 percent of undergraduates to study abroad by 2020. Due to student demand, the college will introduce a new major in Global and Public Health Sciences this fall.

Grace Leu '14, a human biology, health, and society major, experienced both types of programs at Cornell. In her junior year, Leu spent the fall semester taking courses on health care systems and epidemiology at the University of Copenhagen. The following summer, she joined the Global Health Program in Tanzania, where she collaborated with another Cornell student and two students from Kilimanjaro Christian Medical University College.

For four weeks, the team worked on a policy case study about the need for family planning in the East African country. After interviewing key stakeholders in the region surrounding Moshi, they learned that 40 percent of married

Tanzanian women cannot obtain contraception, primarily because of the cultural stigma attached to using birth control.

“What we found was while they had all these resources available to them—free clinics and free contraception—they were embarrassed or scared to actually go and seek out these resources,” Leu said. “There’s a stigma in the country that if you’re married and seeking out contraception, it might indicate that you’re being promiscuous.”

After working a second month in Tanzania with disabled children, Leu returned to Ithaca with a new career objective: On top of a medical degree, she wanted to obtain a master’s in public health. “I realize that doctors do work with individuals, but knowing the population and the community, and understanding the issues they face are really important and complementary to an individual practice,” she said.

Chris Caruso '14 came to a similar conclusion after his experience in the Global Health Program in Zambia. In the summer after his sophomore year, Caruso, a human biology, health, and society major, spent eight weeks in Lusaka, working with a group of students at the University of Zambia School of Medicine on community health problems affecting impoverished rural villages. Each week, the group traveled to a different region to write a case study, with topics ranging from the need for regular vaccinations to the effects of lead contamination from a former copper mine, then submitted their reports to physicians on the medical school faculty.

After his summer in Zambia, Caruso decided he wanted to pursue a joint medical doctorate and a master’s in public health, an option he had not considered before enrolling in the Global Health minor. “People talk about micro- and macro-perspectives of health,” he said. “Physicians do a very good job of looking at the patient in front of them. Public health workers do a very good job of looking at the population as a whole. I think the two things are very important and could be combined in useful ways.”

Designing their Programs

While about half of the 280 students who have graduated with a Global Health minor completed a field experience in one of the four Cornell-sponsored programs—two in Tanzania, and one each in Zambia and India—others have designed their own projects. Along with fieldwork, students must also

take 15 credits of coursework, which exposes them to career possibilities in the global health field.

For her field experience, Narinta Limtrakul '14 chose Thailand, where she spent four weeks treating malaria patients and helping investigate a possible vaccine for the disease at Mahidol University in Bangkok. While Limtrakul grew up in Houston, her Thai parents taught her their native language.

Like several of her classmates, Limtrakul, a human biology, health, and society major, now wants to study medicine and public health after she takes a gap year working in a health-related field. "I want to be able to treat people as a physician, but I also want to keep in mind the social and environmental factors that can affect health as well," she said.

Vanessa Rivera '14 also drew upon her family background—her parents are from Central and South America—when she chose a field experience in Cusco, Peru. In the summer after her junior year, Rivera interned with Alma Sana, a nonprofit organization that produces silicon bracelets for infants to remind their mothers about regular vaccinations. The bracelets were the brainchild of Lauren Braun '11, who imagined them in 2009 while working at a Cusco health clinic as a human development student with a global health minor.

During her internship, Rivera, a policy analysis and management major, helped the staff at the nonprofit complete a study, supported by a \$100,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, by enrolling 100 mothers in the project. Rivera explained to them how to use the bracelets, which have numbers corresponding to months and symbols representing different vaccinations for women who don't speak Spanish or are illiterate.

Rivera says she learned that working in underserved regions of the world requires a great deal of cultural sensitivity. "It's really important to realize that the people you're there to help also have a voice in how you're going to help," she said. "It really has to be a partnership with a grassroots initiative in the community you're working in to have a really big impact."

In 2015, Rivera hopes to begin a two-year assignment with the Peace Corps in Latin America, but this summer she will



Lauren Braun '11 established a nonprofit, Alma Sana, to help mothers in Peru keep their children's vaccines current following her field experience there. Photo provided.

help launch a new field experience for the Global Health Program in the Dominican Republic. During the past year, she has worked with Stoltzfus and Tim Shenk, coordinator for the Cornell-affiliated Committee on U.S.-Latin American Relations to create a curriculum for the program, which will be based at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo in partnership with the Center for the Study of Natural, Economic and Social Realities.

"We wanted to have an option in Latin America, and we wanted to have a Spanish-speaking program since Spanish is one of the most commonly studied languages by our students," Stoltzfus said. "None of the other programs have a language requirement, but this one does—the students must have conversational Spanish to participate."

Working Closer to Home

In addition to coursework, the seven students enrolled in the Dominican Republic program this summer will work at two non-governmental organizations that address health issues in an impoverished neighborhood of Santo Domingo. Their work may focus on reproductive health, sexually transmitted diseases, or child health issues, Stoltzfus said.

At the same time, the Division of Nutritional Sciences is preparing for the first cohort of students in the new major, which will be offered through the College of Human Ecology and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. The new degree will encompass issues not only abroad but also across the United States, said Jeanne Moseley, associate director of the Global Health Program.

"One of the things that we teach in the Introduction to Global Health class is that global health is local health as well," said Moseley, the course's lead instructor. "Global health doesn't just mean beyond the borders of the United States—these are transnational issues."

Caruso, who spent a week volunteering on a Native American reservation in Minnesota last July, agrees that to "truly make global health global," it should include the United States. "I think global includes Ithaca and Upstate New York," he said. "So much of our global health work directly applies to health issues in the United States, and this experience on the reservation made me better understand the issues domestic populations face." • • •



In Thailand, Narinta Limtrakul '14 treated malaria patients and helped investigate a possible vaccine for the disease. Photo provided.

Sherrie Negrea is a freelance writer.

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Global Health Program
human.cornell.edu/dns/globalhealth

Jeanne Moseley
jmm298@cornell.edu

Jessica Sparling
jes439@cornell.edu

Rebecca Stoltzfus
rjs62@cornell.edu