

New Journeys Abroad



Puerto Rico

Pictured left in Cape Town, South Africa (from left) are seniors Natalie Martin, Kate Harris, Jillian Sipperly, Nadia Fletcher, and Wendy Williams. Photograph by Elaine Martin

South Africa

Belgium

Hong Kong

The School of Nursing's full-semester clinical study abroad opportunities in Puerto Rico and South Africa, unique in American nursing programs, have recently branched out with short-term experiences in other locations that may prove to be equally life changing for students and faculty. The University of Connecticut's Academic Plan aims for thirty percent of undergraduates to study in locations across the globe. In traditional study abroad programs, in the health care field students are given long-term exposure to new kinds of patients, different types of treatments, and diverse cultures, improving the way students approach healthcare back at home. Educators now believe that shorter study abroad experiences are also significant and may prove less of a financial hardship for some families.

The spring 2012 semester began with Professor Kathryn Hegedus leading seven students to Belgium for a two-week long immersion program. In Belgium Hegedus and her delegation were joined by fifty-six nursing students from seven other countries to discuss chronic illness and end-of-life care. The focus of the discussion was three-fold: building interdisciplinary cooperation between care-givers and professionals, holistically addressing the needs of the patient, and enhancing awareness and understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds.

"The contact with students and faculty from eight countries provided valuable information and life-long [relationships] that will serve [these] students well in their future careers," explained Hegedus. In just two week's time, students were able to share a semester's worth of knowledge and cultural experience.

The Belgium conference was followed-up by a two-week exchange journey to the University of Hong Kong where Dr. Art Engler and UConn Nursing students were exposed to the approach to healthcare in Asia. In the future, a delegation of nursing faculty and students from Hong Kong will make a reciprocal visit to Storrs. Both UConn and the University of Hong Kong are members of Universitas 21, the leading global network of research universities. Professor John McNulty '84 MS, a veteran of the School's study abroad curriculum, says that this particular program benefits more than just the UConn delegation, but the "entire school," as students interact together and "[fulfill] the philosophy of creating global citizens." Both delegations are sure to leave a lasting impact on the outlook of nursing education at each university.

Such positive results motivate the School of Nursing's administrators to grow the program. In the next several years its leaders hope to exchange not just nursing students but nursing faculty. Such an exchange will not only benefit the student body, but the entire faculty, who are exposed to new pedagogies and approaches to learning. Work has also begun to examine the possibility of sending both pre-licensure and graduate students to locations like the United Kingdom or Honduras. These locations offer students opportunities to study the broad history of modern nursing and to provide direct aid to regions of the world in need of nurses.

Additionally, study abroad programs help student nurses to develop what McNulty refers to as a nurse with "global" and "cultural competence," that is "the sensitivity, the openness, and the ability to recognize that we all have much in common even though we all come from different cultures and backgrounds." Nurses take this cultural awareness and are able to apply it directly into their clinical practice, making them able to treat patients in the culturally and religiously diverse United States even more effectively. These programs go a long way to foster mutual respect and understanding across cultural and ethnic bounds.

The resounding success of the Puerto Rico, South Africa, Belgium, and Hong Kong programs has inspired the School of Nursing to do more; the movement to send a greater number of students abroad gains momentum upon each group's return. The hard work needed to organize, schedule, and create each trip never fails to pay off. As students return home and graduate to become nurses, it becomes clear that they took away not just souvenirs from their trip, but life-changing experiences. ■



Dr. Kathryn Hegedus looks forward to her transition from coordinating study abroad and teaching in the School of Nursing to international nursing work and research. With colleagues in Ghent, Belgium, she organized the meeting of the Interdisciplinary Program on Chronic and End-of-Life Care (IPEC) for January 2013 to be held in Setubal, Portugal. She is excited to lead more School of Nursing students abroad to Belgium in the coming years, and makes it her personal goal to develop collaborative research projects between faculty and students. Hegedus plans to fulfill her second Fulbright Specialist Award in Prague, Czech Republic this coming October.



Pictured on left is nursing student Garrett Whittaker '11 (l) with an RN from the Veterans Medical Center in San Juan, Puerto Rico during clinical rotation.

Read more about our student's experiences abroad on their blogs:
<http://uconnsouthafrica2011.wordpress.com>
<https://uconnnursingpr2011.wordpress.com>

*E*xcellence

PhD student, Emily Tuthill, recently completed her internship with the World Health Organization (WHO). She worked with the WHO in the HIV/AIDS department.