

The Johns Hopkins Center for Global Health Utilizing Undergraduates for Your 2012 Placement

The Center is attempting to increase the number of undergraduates (UG) participating in the Global Health Established Field Placements (GHEFP) program in two ways: increasing the number of placements accepting UGs and increasing the competitiveness of UGs. This page addresses the first issue. To gain some insight into the issues Dick Dunning, the Center's Program Manager, and Jim Goodyear, Associate Director of the UG Public Health Studies Program, met with several faculty members from the schools of Public Health, Medicine, and Nursing who have extensive experience coordinating projects abroad. Interviews were conducted in person and others were done over conferences calls from their overseas sites. Common themes emerged as we asked them for their opinions and insights regarding using UGs as members of their research teams.

All admitted to a certain initial apprehension—even reluctance—to accepting UGs as research assistants. Three of our informants (Sullivan, Mullany, Katz) said that they had difficulty overcoming this reluctance given their perception that UGs would not bring requisite skills or maturity to the demands of the particular research project and/or cultural environment.

Interestingly they each indicated in the upcoming cycle they would revisit their own stance on using UGs. The reasons include the following 1) all supported the idea of UGs doing research abroad because they readily acknowledged that it was important for the profession for young people to have opportunities in the field. 2) In discussing effective uses for UGs, one researcher (Mullany) outlined research projects that required retrospective data analysis aspects; however none of the grad researchers were particularly keen to part take in. These projects involved intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm both of which UGs possess in large doses. 3) From their experience, the prospect of pairing UGs on-site with grad students seemed most plausible (Katz) and an effective way to address concerns about levels of maturity.

We also interviewed four other researchers, who this summer or last summer, extensively utilized the services of UGs at their sites abroad. All four had glowing reports about the deep contributions of their youngest team members. One (Farley) said how the UG played a pivotal role in helping drive the project forward this summer through data entry and analysis that were critical in producing four abstracts and providing the basis of an RO1 K grant proposal. Another researcher (Kosek) told us about originating a research project involving social networking that particularly suited the UGs' technical skills, but also made sure we understood that the UG had analytical skills that enabled effective participation in a wide variety of research tasks throughout the summer. The other two researchers (Abashawl and Gupta) have had many UGs as summer researcher assistants in the past several years and both continue to include these young people going forward because they viewed the payoff in terms of research production well worth the 'risk' in terms of time spent mentoring.

Some common themes emerged and from them recommendations 1) that UGs be paired on-site with graduate students and/or local staff attached to the project. This

Undergraduate Students in International Health: A Win-Win

At first, I had reservations about accepting an UG student for my research site in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. My work with drug-resistant TB patients carries appreciable risks without appropriate attention to detail, particularly the nuances of infection control. Luckily, the Center for Global Health convinced me to meet with Erika Ho, a Homewood Campus UG majoring in Public Health. Erika immediately put my fears at ease with a surprising level of maturity and preparation. As many of our Johns Hopkins UGs, Erika's resume and skill set was impressive and I was convinced she had an excellent foundation upon which to build the next generation of global health researchers.

During her experience in South Africa, Erika capably developed an Epi-Info database, reviewed and abstracted data from over 100 patients' charts, entered and cleaned this data and assisted with abstract preparation. Through these efforts, our research team was able to collect necessary pilot data for an RO1 as well as prepare and submit four successful abstracts to international scientific meetings. This experience was truly a win-win for both the faculty and the student and demonstrates the caliber of our Johns Hopkins UG students.

Jason Farley, Assistant Professor, SON

allows for a more peer-to-peer relationship that helps the UG relate to the experience in profession rather than simply personal terms. 2) Language skills can be useful, but fluency is not essential if the research tasks are adjusted to focus on data entry or analysis rather than data collection. 3) Preparing UGs ahead of time regarding tasks and cultural setting can be essential to having the UG hit the ground running.

Our overall sense was that even among those researchers who have not utilized UGs recently, there was a readiness to appreciate that the enthusiasm, skill sets, and (relative) maturity they bring to the research and the overall environment is remarkably positive. Some say they emphatically want that particular UG to return to the project, some of these UGs have been inspired to apply for and receive Fulbright Scholarships to continue doing research in the field. And of course, an overwhelming percentage goes on into careers in research and/or medicine thereby validating the investment that we make in them at this early point in their professional lives.

Principal investigators and program staff are highly encouraged to consider accepting Hopkins UG students into their placements.

Placement Types

In the 2011 cycle, placements were requested where only graduate students were accepted or UGs had to compete head to head with graduate students. In 2012, the Center will accept and is encouraging placements that wish to have a graduate student as well as an UG student. The Center will also accept placements solely for UG students. Because part of the funding streams for our programs are dedicated, we can guarantee up to 15 slots for UGs.

Activities or Undergraduates

In our interviews, it was clear that there were tasks that need to be accomplished that could be competently accomplished by UGs. They may not be the kinds of things that immediately come to mind in having someone work with you. However, for the UG student, exposure to research and practice overseas is key. Some examples of work that could be assigned to an UG student:

- Aspects of your project that need to be completed, but may not fit the needs of a graduate student. For example, an UG could work on required reports and documents, including summarizing project processes and accomplishments for a report to the funder. This would give the student exposure to the project, its approach, history and accomplishments.
- Include the student in technology activities that match their skill level. For example, students could be involved in taking readings from environmental monitoring equipment and organizing and compiling these readings.
- Students usually have fairly high-level exposure to office computing technology (Word, Excel, etc) and could be involved in providing training and technical assistance to in-country staff working on the project.
- Consider requesting computer science majors to help with programming needs in connection with data handling and cleaning.

Questions about accepting UG students may be addressed to:

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