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English212s: Creative Non-Fiction

Global Health Through Her Eyes

(Visual acuity chart: taken by Grace at a community venue in Ghana)

“I wanted to become a medical missionary to serve patients around the world who can’t afford healthcare otherwise—I wanted to become as selfless as my parents were for me.”

At Duke, we are often taught to think globally and apply our knowledge and skills at an international setting. One of the most appealing aspects of Duke is the large number of study abroad programs and global service programs. The Duke Global Health Institute was established in 2006 to “address health disparities around the world”¹. Currently, its primary undergraduate program is the Global Health Certificate (GHC).

Grace, one of my good friends at Duke, had the opportunity to earn her global health education by taking classes on campus, participating in the Organization for Tropical Studies (OTS) Global Health semester program in Costa Rica, and volunteering for Unite for Sight® in Ghana. Each step of her journey taught her invaluable lessons about global community service and shaped her career goals as an aspiring health professional.

When I asked Grace how she first became interested in global health, she told me that the term itself is an “appealing catchphrase” that captivates the attention of those with a desire to provide international community service.

“[Global health] attracts those who wish to contribute to meaningful initiatives that can truly catalyze change and improve the lives of global citizens around the world.”

Before sophomore year of college, she hadn’t learned anything about what the academic field of Global Health actually is and what it entails. But the idea of traveling and helping others seemed like a great learning opportunity.

Since she grew up in a Christian family with first-generation immigrant parents, she has witnessed the power of selflessness and the richness of giving.

“Always being inspired by the selflessness of my parents’ decisions to better the lives of their children, I always knew that when I ‘grew up,’ I wanted to become a medical missionary to serve patients around the world who can’t afford healthcare otherwise—I wanted to become as selfless as my parents were for me.”

Prior to coming to the U.S., Grace’s parents had established careers and comfortable lives in South Korea. In order to provide a better educational environment for their children, they left everything they had in order to start a new beginning in America. Being raised by such great role models, Grace is inspired to be a selfless and charitable person.

While many people tend to explore a new discipline by taking an introductory course, Grace was first exposed to the Duke global health coursework by taking a bioethics elective. This course not only taught her the ethical issues associated with global health, but also stimulated her curiosity for how US-based NGOs operate in foreign communities. Additionally, this class fulfilled the pre-requisite to participate in global health study abroad programs.

The OTS-Costa Rica program was Grace’s first global health field experience. But this program wasn’t a part of her original plan. After being waitlisted for the summer OTS-South Africa program, an OTS administrator encouraged her to apply to the fall OTS-Costa Rica program instead. Initially, she was reluctant to leave Duke for an entire semester. But in the end, she realized that this program fits well with her GHC requirements and Biology major.

“It was the best decision I’ve made,” she happily told me.
In Costa Rica, her coursework became the foundation of her global health education. Furthermore, fieldwork and research practicum were incorporated into the curriculum to allow experiential learning through real-life applications.

“Tropical Medicine and Public Health was by far the best class I’ve taken in Costa Rica because it couples fieldwork experience (such as working in a primary clinic, visiting CR clinics and hospitals, and interviewing residents within different communities) with lectures that cover a diverse array of topics, including infectious diseases, health care systems, epidemiology, and medical anthropology.”

She reflected that this was spectacular and life-changing experience, and she hopes that more Duke students would take advantage of field learning opportunities abroad. From that point on, Grace became eager to engage in further global health excursions.

Through the Biology Majors listserv, Grace discovered Unite for Sight® (UFS), a non-profit organization specialized in delivering long-lasting and sustainable healthcare to communities around the world by eliminating patient barriers to healthcare.

It is important to note that many other organizations only have short-term medical missions that temporarily provide treatment and service in resource-poor areas.

In Grace’s opinion, “these organizations foster a dependence on charity in the people, and may even be exacerbating the health issue in question.”

UFS is a sustainable global health organization that collaborates with local clinics in Ghana, Honduras, and India to extend access to eye care to patients living in extreme poverty.

“It is unique in that while UFS channels human and financial resources to the local clinics, each individual clinic has the ultimate authority to determine how the community outreach programs are designed and implemented.” This structure allows local physicians to provide healthcare without the constraints of foreign organizations and to incorporate factors such as culture nuances and beliefs into effective patient care.

Another distinctive aspect of UFS is the extensive training all volunteers must go through. Not only do they have to take several online courses on global health, ethics, eye health and pathology, and cultural competency, they must also fundraise at least $1,800 to fund cataract surgeries for those in need, collect at least 600 reading glasses/sunglasses, and shadow an optometrist or ophthalmologist to learn about the basics of eye care. While Grace
thought these requirements were quite challenging, she agrees that these responsibilities sufficiently prepared her to be effective volunteer.

“[These requirements] increased my interest in evaluating global health organizations for social responsibility and sustainability, two characteristics that are imperative for effective global health work.”

During the 7-week program, Grace was able to travel around Ghana to work with 3 of the local partner clinics. These 3 clinics used different strategies to approach the common goal of alleviating preventable blindness. Each day, volunteers had the same routine in the clinics. Their tasks included: testing the visual acuity of every patient using the E-chart, helping the clinic staff worker to dispense prescribed eye medication and corrective lenses to the patients, recording the information of patients who are referred to the clinics for surgery, and updating and organizing patient record database.

UFS volunteers also had the responsibility of shadowing ophthalmologists during surgeries. Because UFS funds the surgeries by directly giving money to the doctors, they must keep track of the number of operations done each day. As a result, volunteers are required to watch the doctor perform the surgeries, then sign forms indicating the number/type of operation that was done for each patient.

Any experience abroad would certainly come with obstacles. For Grace and other volunteers, the language barrier was a substantial problem. While English is the official language in Ghana, there are over 70 languages spoken across the country.

“Communication problems caused a lot frustration and most of the volunteers were dependent on the translators,” she explained.

Overtime, Grace was able to improve direct communication with local patients through learning eye care related phrases in 2 languages: Twi (commonly spoken in central/southern Ghana) and Dagbani (commonly spoke in the northern Ghana). Additionally, she improved the universal language of hand and body gestures. While learning new languages was challenging, Grace found the experience to be very rewarding because it allowed her to connect with the local people and improve her patient interactions.

When I asked Grace whether this service trip impacted her post-graduation plans, she told me that her UFS experience motivated her to pursue a degree in public health before going to medical school. Besides undergraduate students, UFS volunteers also include doctors, public
health graduate students, and medical students from the U.S. One of the PhD students told Grace about Master’s International, a Peace Corps program that integrates a Master of Public Health (MPH) degree with overseas service work.

Before Grace’s experience in Ghana, the PC experience, consisting of 27 months of volunteer work, seemed quite overwhelming to her.

“[However,] my experiences with UFS and with the local clinics were able to show me that, while international work is self-sacrificial and highly demanding in various aspects, it is something that I can handle and manage.” Grace feels confident that participating in the Peace Corps would further prepare her to become a competent global health professional.

After Grace completes her education and training, she hopes to work at a community or regional hospital within the U.S. She elucidates that she does not plan to work at a university or private institution because health disparities exist among the lower class here in our own country and she wants to be a resource to low-income patients.

With the money that she earns, she hopes to financially support trustworthy and effective global health organizations, such as UFS, and embark on global health service trips during her vacations.

Although having a full-time career abroad would be exciting and fulfilling, Grace no longer thinks that traveling is an obligatory component of working in the public health field.

“I realize that by working in the US, I can channel more financial resources to global health efforts that need them, while being able to work with domestic public health issues.”

As a graduating senior and experienced global health student, Grace left me with these words:

“While it’s important to care for my global citizens, I want to care for my fellow citizens at home, where I’ve had great opportunities to education and other life-enriching experiences.”

Acknowledgement:

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