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Promoting Global Health Awareness Through Hands-On Training

Christina B. Gunther, Sacred Heart University
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When you get Christina Gunther talking about international study-abroad opportunities provided through Sacred Heart University’s College of Health Professions, the conversation quickly moves from travelogue and course listings to social justice, unique hands-on training and life-altering experiences. Gunther, director, Global Programs & Assessment, isn’t just an advocate—she’s a coach, mentor, diplomat, social worker, international tour director and global healthcare champion. And she’s working to change the world, one student, one country and one cultural experience at a time “with a talented group of faculty.”

The College of Health Professions, says Gunther, is committed to providing students with international opportunities to promote global health awareness, cultural competence and education that helps people engage in social justice. Global programs include short-term study abroad, mission and service learning and clinical experiences. Whenever possible an interdisciplinary model is provided, and students are exposed to what amounts to a crash course in international health-care awareness, inequities, politics and, hopefully, potential solutions.

Qualifying students choose from existing programs in countries including Guatemala, Haiti, Jamaica, Ireland, Luxembourg and Mexico, and new programs are constantly being minted, with efforts now on track to create opportunities in Cuba and Ghana. Some of the efforts under way include:

- A health assessment survey in the Dominican Republic, in partnership with Danbury Hospital
- Physical therapy, nursing occupational therapy and speech-language pathology students working in Guatemala
- Occupational therapy efforts in Haiti
- Nursing in Jamaica, with focus on pediatrics and medical-surgical nurse practice for undergraduates, family nurse practitioner and doctor of nursing program candidates
- A two-week course in Luxembourg for students in nursing and physical therapy
- Undergraduate nursing and exercise science classes in Ireland focused on public policy, quality improvement, nursing education and other special topics
- Athletic training, including internships with Major League Baseball facilities, in the Dominican Republic
- Occupational therapy, nursing and speech-language pathology students working with Lakota Indians in South Dakota

These programs combine hands-on field training and clinical practice with classroom studies and exposure to health-care facilities and activities. In Jamaica, for example, nursing students help provide primary care for up to a 1,000 patients during their field visit, and students in Mexico and Guatemala visit patients in rural villages, jungles and mountain communities.

“These are truly eye-opening experiences for most of our students, and are especially critical in this modern world where diseases and health crises are ever-changing and incredibly portable,”
Gunther explains. “Just look at the Ebola crisis spreading in West Africa. It’s now threatening neighboring countries, Europe and even the United States. These lessons help us appreciate the magnitude of the global health stage and illustrate how important it is to have students learn about health care from various perspectives and across multiple cultures.”

Gunther says that cultural awareness training is an important precursor to studying abroad and that it begins with examining our own culture more closely. Without that understanding, she says, it’s harder to comprehend challenges facing other countries and peoples.

“Many of us in the United States and other developed countries take access to good health care services for granted, or at least know it’s there and available when we need it,” Gunther observes. “Government-support programs like Medicaid and adequate medical services do not exist everywhere. These study-abroad experiences open our students’ eyes, help them develop confidence and often can affirm their career choices.”

Physical and occupational therapy students raise funds to donate wheelchairs to patients in Guatemala, including going to the organizations and doing the patient fitting themselves. Students also solicit donations of medical supplies and then carry the supplies with them to their field experiences.

Many of the students who participate elect to return to the countries where they study to share their enthusiasm, commitment and raised awareness with others. “That advocacy also is critical and is an outgrowth of the strong service learning ethic found at SHU, and the faculty’s commitment to teaching ethical care,” Gunther says.