Academic Observations in Ghana

Excerpts from IAP blogger Christine Fukuda

History of Western Medicine in Ghana started out as my favorite class. Now, I know some of you may think it strange that the class I most enjoy in Ghana is focused on western medicine, but I assure you there is much more to the class than European history. The class involves in depth descriptions of colonialism and the effects it had on the health and living conditions of both Europeans and Africans living in Ghana. This class has been especially interesting not only in the content but in the way the class is taught. For the first few weeks of class I had an amazing professor teaching the course. He was an excellent speaker and he kept the class interactive and engaging. It was also very interesting to hear about colonialism from the Ghanaian perspective. The professor provided very interesting insight on Ghanaian views and attitudes towards colonialism, which were, to my surprise, not all negative. He did gesture to myself and a few other Americans in the class when mentioning something about the colonists, which was a touch awkward at the time. But, he made up for it with his immense level of knowledge on the subject and ability to engage everyone in the discussion. After the first few classes, we were assigned a new professor for reasons unknown and since then the class hasn’t been quite as appealing. The content and readings however are still very intriguing and I do still enjoy learning about the history of health in Ghana.

Next we have Socio-Cultural Dimension of International Health. This class has involved an investigation into the distinct elements of culture and their effect on health. This class has been interesting in content but what I like the most about it is the interactive aspect of the class. The students in the class have been together for three years and they are all very comfortable with each other in class.

SIDE NOTE: Once you choose a major, you take classes in a very strict progression that are often only in your specific department. When I shared my class schedule with my history TA, he informed me that I was on an “Academic Safari” (hence the title) because my classes were all in different departments, something that is unheard of here.

The class is organized more like a discussion than a lecture. The students are always making comments or asking questions to the professor or each other. While this gets frustrating at times, it’s been interesting to hear the views the students have about current health issues in Ghana. Some notable points include discussion about HIV/AIDS, contraception and violence against women. In an area where HIV/AIDS and sex are highly charged and still stigmatized subjects and the familial structure is predominantly at least moderately patriarchal, the conversations regarding these topics got heated pretty quickly. The students however, were always very interesting in hearing the opinions of myself and the few other Americans in the class. They often asked for ‘Sister White’ (referring to us American girls) to give our perspective. While the method of asking was a bit unorthodox, it was still very interesting to participate and observe in the discussion.
You’ve already heard all about Twi. It’s still a pretty foreign language to all of us in the class. Some days I feel like a master and other days I can’t fathom ever being able to speak the language. In Twi there are two extra letters in the alphabet and the entire language is based on tone, so the way you say the words also determines what they mean. It’s a tricky language to say the least. My favorite part of Twi, however, has been learning about names. In Ghana, children are named first for the day of the week that they were born on. Later in life, they may receive another name based on their religion. From my experiences in meeting Ghanaians, I would say that about half go by their day name and the other from their religious name.

Last but not least, Traditional Dance! This class has been quite the emotional roller coaster simply because I go back and forth between loving and hating the class. I love the class because it is so fun to learn the dances and to hear the drum patterns and see the Ghanaian students and TAs move flawlessly. I hate the class because, as an oburoni, I am not wired to move like they can and there are times (more often than not) where I just cannot follow the drum patterns and I stand with a blank stare on my face hoping for a dance miracle. But with that said, I am quite positive that once the final performance is over and done with, I will not regret taking the class and I will look back with only good things to say about the class. So far this semester we have learned three dances. The first is called the Damba. This dance originated in the Northern region of Ghana and is mostly performed by royalty or those in power.

The second dance we learned is called Kundum. This is a harvest dance that is performed in festivals to celebrate the hard work that was put into the harvest. There are six moves in the beginning that represent the harvest. The first movement is spreading the seeds. The second movement is to celebrate the end of the planting stage. The third movement is picking the fruit from the trees and placing them in your baskets. The fourth movement is digging up the roots. The fifth and sixth are symbols of celebration and travel to new farming lands. There is a freestyle section in the middle and then it ends with all the dancers hobbling off the stage to represent the elderly that can no longer work in the harvest.

The third dance is by far the hardest of them all. I don’t know the actual name of it because the TAs always say it really fast and I haven’t quite caught it yet. But it is a war dance that is different from the other two both in emotion and structure. The other two dances are performed in circles with smiling faces while this dance is more stationary with no smiling.

Now that classes are essentially over, I have had the opportunity to look back on the semester as a whole. In the original description of this study abroad program, CIEE states in the handbook that we should not expect to be academically challenged while in Ghana. For the most part, I would have to agree with them. Compared to the rigors of the UW curriculum, the University of Ghana seems much more manageable. That being said, I do not want to take away from the school. The courses, students and professors are all different from those in the United States and the academic system is tailored to accommodate the Ghanaian styles of teaching and learning. The challenge for me has come in the form of adjusting to this system instead of trying to force my views of what academia should be.
I have learned a lot from these courses but this is insignificant in comparison to what I have learned/am learning outside of the university. My academic challenge extends beyond exams and papers and into figuring out the vast and ever-confusing enigma that is Ghana.

Reflection on the Internship experience – by Audrey Hanson, IAP Peer Advisor

During my semester in Ghana, besides taking classes at the University of Ghana I also had the opportunity to participate in an internship with a local NGO. This was a really amazing experience and allowed me to gain a lot of skills and experience in working abroad. Besides boosting my resume, the internship also allowed me to gain confidence in my surroundings and experience a whole new side of Ghana.

For my internship I was paired with a local organization called Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF). This organization works with women’s rights issues and seeks to increase women’s access to social justice. I was really excited about this internship experience because I have always been interested in women’s empowerment and I was excited to see how this would translate in a foreign perspective. Before beginning our internships, my program directors with CIEE gave us a brief orientation meeting about what to expect with our internships. They told us that we should go into our internships with very open minds and also not to expect a concrete job or task right away. They also told us that the first part of the internship would revolve around the staff at our internship sites getting used to our presence and seeing what we were willing to do. Overall, they prepared us for a give and take relationship and told us that we needed to be assertive into what we would be doing with our internships. Looking back, one of the things I was most nervous about was the transportation to and from my internship site. This involved taking the local transportation “trotros” to downtown Accra and navigating my way through stations and neighborhoods. It was really intimidating at first, especially because there aren’t really set rules about how to ride trotros. However, it was only way of getting downtown and after successfully boarding the correct trotro and navigating my way through the stations, I felt very comfortable and confident in my ability to use the system of public transportation.

At my internship site, I was fortunate enough to be given a concrete task. My responsibilities included a media project, where I would clip news articles from the major newspapers in Ghana that centered on the topics of women’s rights, domestic violence, women’s health, and human rights. I would then file these reports for future use in assisting in drafting new laws and recording the effectiveness of WiLDAF’s advocacy network. This was a really interesting task, especially with reading all the foreign newspapers and seeing what constitutes headline news in a different country. It was also interesting to see how news was presented. Besides this, I was also responsible for taking notes during meetings and overseeing some of the communications between office staff members. This was really my first exposure to office work, and I found it really interesting especially in the foreign setting. Overall, my experience was relatively more
structured than some of my friends’ experiences, but there was still the unexpected element that comes from working in a developing country. For example, one day I traveled downtown to find that the office (and neighborhood) was completely out of power, so they sent me home. Usually I would be a little annoyed by the fact that no called I and I had to spend money to transport myself back to the university, but by then my mindset in Ghana was just to go with the flow and expect the unexpected.

Another component of my internship was an academic partnership with a professor at the University of Ghana. Throughout the semester I would meet with this professor and I also turned in two reflection papers about my experience. My professor was a member of the political sciences department, so he was able to give me further insight on the political backdrop of women’s rights in Ghana. I also had to complete a final paper in relation to the broader topic of global women’s rights and do research that connected to my experience with the internship. I found this aspect of my internship to be specifically rewarding, especially since I am international studies major. Being able to compare my experience to the global position on women’s rights was really insightful and made me want to get involved further.

Overall, I am extremely grateful for the experience my internship provided. I was able to develop new skills and confidence in a foreign setting. I was also able to work with international colleagues and gain work experience for my future career prospects. I found the internship especially rewarding because it complimented my academic experience and provided another learning-experience outside the classroom. I would highly recommend the internship option to anyone thinking about going to Ghana, it’s awesome and allows you to experience the country in a whole new way!