Committed to the World: Rhodes Scholars in Global Health

Sam Galler’s passion for China began with serendipity. It was the summer after high school, when the Colorado native, a former competitor in World Youth Chess Olympics, received an invitation to spend 2-1/2 weeks in China with the National Committee on US-China Relations. “I’d never thought much about China,” he recalls, “and I was blown away by how interesting it was.” With no background in the language, he worked hard enough his first year at Harvard to get into the native speaker track. By junior year he had settled on an East Asian Studies major when serendipity hit again. Course “shopping,” he followed a friend into Societies of the World 25 (SW25): Case Studies in Global Health, a course taught by Professors Arthur Kleinman, Paul Farmer, Salmaan Keshavjee, and Anne Becker—and was hooked. “Fundamentally it was a call to action,” says Galler, now a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford. To help map out a path to integrate his new health interests with East Asian Studies courses, he added a secondary field concentration, in Global Health and Health Policy (GHHP). First offered in 2011, the GHHP option helps undergraduate students build a coordinated core from over 160 course offerings that relate to global health and related research across the disciplinary spectrum.

As he completes his first year toward fully funded doctoral studies at Oxford, Galler is building on his senior honors thesis, which led him back to China to study the origins of Chinese HIV/AIDS NGOs. He is expanding the work to ask broader questions about civil society and technology in China as it relates to health care in the public sector. He is also having fun: teaching chess, playing tennis, and enjoying Oxford’s tradition of choirs and a cappella singing, and gathering a list of curious local phrases while also working to learn the British academic system. “I would say I’m still dabbling,” he laughs.

Rhodes applicants at Harvard can benefit from help and support during the process from faculty mentors as well as fellowship committee tutors, like graduate student Alesia McGregor. Now a doctoral candidate in health policy at the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, McGregor was a Resident Tutor in Quincy House specializing in global health when she helped both Galler and Zachary Frankel (’11), a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford who was a physics and math concentrator at Harvard. Fellowship tutors advise on essay writing, help with mock interviews, and tutor in their areas of specialty. “What stood out to me about both Zach
and Sam," says McGregor, "was their stellar across-the-board academic performance. For Zach, it was his drive, maturity, and interest; with Sam, his deep interest in finding ways to connect his intimate knowledge of culture and systems to health policies."

"Sam has a real commitment to the world," says Arthur Kleinman, the Esther and Sidney Rabb Professor of Anthropology at Harvard University and Professor of Medical Anthropology in Global Health and Social Medicine and Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. "In 37 years at Harvard, I've taught many graduate students, but it's the undergrads who are the most extraordinary. I would put Sam at the same level as the best of my students when they were undergraduates."

Kleinman also advised Allan Hsiao ('13), an economics concentrator with language skills in Chinese, French, Korean, Arabic, and Haitian Creole, who will begin his Rhodes scholarship this fall, studying rural-to-urban migration in China. Hsiao's interest in development economics was sparked by Science of Living Systems 19 (SLS19), a course on nutrition and global health co-taught by Professors Christopher Duggan, Wafaie Fawzi, and Clifford Lo. Hsiao's interests in Asia's growing global importance led him to serve as Editor of the Harvard Asia Quarterly, producing its most popular recent issue, the Winter 2012 issue on health and healthcare in Asia. Kleinman, the journal's faculty advisor, praises Hsiao's breadth of interest, curiosity, and extraordinary managerial skills. "As an undergraduate," says Kleinman, "Allan took over a journal that was in crisis, one that had always been edited by graduate students. And in less than six months, he improved the content, the regularity, the financing—he took a journal with great potential and completely turned it around."

Hsiao plans to use his scholarship to examine the issues underlying poverty and development, including the causes and effects of human migration. For example, he says, rural migrants in China often move to the cities in search of resources and opportunities; upon arrival, they often face great challenges. Outside of the social support structures available in their hometowns, some are forced to sleep on park benches until they find employment. Hsiao looks forward to new opportunities at Oxford for cross-disciplinary research intersections, as he builds on lessons learned from Harvard mentors such as Arabic language professor William Granara, in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and Department of Economics lecturer Kiran Gajwani.

Victor Yang ('12) is another Rhodes scholar who, like Galler, pursued a GHHP secondary field at Harvard, in addition to his History of Science concentration. Yang's path to a Rhodes award led from his home in Lexington, Kentucky, to Bulgaria and South Africa, and back to the United States, to draw on global lessons for American healthcare policy. Now completing his Master of Public Policy at Oxford's new Blavatnik School of Government, Yang is working as a fellow for Boston Mayor Thomas Menino, and beginning his PhD fieldwork with AIDS activists on the East Coast, exploring the role of racial consciousness in furthering social movements.

Yang too credits serendipity—in his case, the opportunity to work with Health Leads, a non-profit organization that plunged him as a freshman into addressing the stark socioeconomic needs of patients in a Boston pediatric clinic. As a patient advocate, he says, "I began to understand the systematic and structural barriers to social mobility within our society. My clients taught me about the utmost resilience of the human
spirit." Yang's work, he hopes, will help others to "mobilize across markers of difference like race and class to realize inclusive agendas and social movements, to unite in the enduring fight for racial and socioeconomic justice."

Read full-length profiles:

Sam Galler
Allan Hsiao
Victor Yang

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