Networking Dinner Builds Global Health Community

When students invited for a sumptuous dinner at the Harvard Faculty Club are so lost in discussion that they forget to eat, chances are, something is going right. This was just one sign of the interactive bonds created and strengthened during the Harvard Global Health Institute’s Summer 2012 Post-Internship Networking Dinner in late October. The event was designed to connect students who had participated in Institute-funded summer experiential learning opportunities with each other, and to spur ideas for action, paving the way for conversations in the years ahead. And yes, the food was phenomenal.

An internship can be a lonely experience, with students working in separate locations on individual or small group projects. During 2012, the Institute funded nearly 100 students in global experiential learning opportunities in the U.S. and abroad through six categories: International Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowships (I-SURF); Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowships (SURF); a new Harvard Global Health Institute Program Development Internship; the Idea Translation Lab (ITL); external organizations; and independent research. The networking dinner opened the way to build on these global health connections at the local level and learn from the wisdom of previous interns.

Dinner speakers included Annemarie Ryu (Class of ’13) who shared from her recent work with a Hmong community in Minnesota, and reflected on her path at Harvard. A native of Rochester, Minnesota, concentrating in social anthropology, Ryu has used summer internship opportunities to help install latrines and water-purification units in the Dominican Republic, create a text message appointment reminder system for pregnant women in India, and recently launch a company, Global Village Fruits, that will sell south Indian jackfruit in the US to benefit farmers in India. (Read more about Global Village Fruits here.)

Cultural humility is vital, said Michael Hadley, a medical student (HMS ’15) with an MS degree in global health and population from Harvard School of Public Health and experience working in Idjwi Island, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, India, the Czech Republic, and the US. "It's vital to understand your place in the social communities," he emphasized; coming from Harvard does not put you at an advantage for implementing changes you may wish to see during your visit. The important thing is to build partnerships, both in the field and on campus. Joining a student group, for example, helps you think beyond...
the campus bubble. Hadley highlighted the importance of finding and creating pathways to thinking broadly about global health. The Harvard Global Health Institute’s annual pre-departure training program aims to build student capacity in cultural and ethical awareness.

“And be creative!” said Loredana George, Assistant Director of International Development, Education, Global Health and Human Rights at the Office of Career Services (OCS), one of two OCS speakers to focus on practical career ideas. Not all relevant job titles include the word “health.” There are many organizations engaged in global health–related activities, and lots of ways to connect. An interdisciplinary focus is also important, said her colleague, Oona Ceder, who directs premedical and health career advising at OCS. Look at the physicians whose lives most inspire you; many of them came to medicine from a path outside the sciences. Both George and Ceder offered solid advice on timing the career search and practical, concrete ways to get involved immediately, including graduate and undergraduate student groups that focus on global health.

Conversations bubbled during the informal reception and dinner, where a faculty mentor at each table helped to facilitate questions and discussion—and yes, reminded folks to eat! Emails continued late into the night, as students put ideas into action, and looked forward to new opportunities for global health at Harvard.