During the summer of 2014 Thirty-three students (25 BSNs and 8 ABSNs) traveled abroad. Their travel ranged from 10 days to 12 weeks (the average stay was 1 month) in the following countries: Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Philippines, People’s Republic of China, Romania and Lithuania. Some traveled through existing UNC programs and contacts. Others made arrangements independently. Over the years students have traveled with the following organizations: International Service Learning, International Volunteer Head Quarters, Work the World, Atlantis Project, The UNC Malawi Project, Carolina for Kibera and Gap Guru. Below are their responses to questions concerning their travel and learning experiences.

**Overview of the experience and reflection on process**

Travel expenses ranged from about $1200 to $5000. Students received support through scholarships & grants, gifts from family, friends & faith based organizations as well as, personal savings and school loans. In the past, scholarships have been awarded from the following sources: the Global Health Fellowship Scholarship from the UNC Global Education Center, The Aubrey Lee Brooks Scholarship, The Hogan Fellowship Scholarship which is associated with the Johnston Scholars Program, the STARR scholarship and the Class of 1938 Scholarship. A number of students received funding from the School of Nursing, as well.

Students volunteered in hospitals, community/public health clinics, home health agencies, orphanages and community-based organizations. Most students worked with populations that represented the life span—men, women, and children of all ages including residents of a nursing home.

Some students characterized their experience as a clinical experience, reflecting traditional hospital based work. Others worked with health education programs and others conducted health screenings. Occasionally, there are some settings where the experience is primarily an observational one such as in China. For all students, there was an element of health systems comparison since they were able to reflect upon differences in the settings where they worked compared with the US health care system.

Students felt the most helpful resources for developing this opportunity were the N 489 information sessions, internet searches, information provided by the HSL at UNC and personal contacts.

- *I think the information sessions held with students who had previously traveled abroad were very helpful.*
I found that it was a bit stressful to organize the trip on my own. It would be nice if Chris Harlan could take a group somewhere so that people who want to travel with a group can and others can still plan their own trip if they wish.

Google was a big help plus a LOT of previous travel experience. I knew I wanted to align myself with an organization that provides care and the money I spent to volunteer with them went directly to the organization-not a third party referral.

Faculty in the SON such as Dr Sherwood and Chris Harlan were helpful.

The most useful resource for me was a class mate who got the ball rolling to make the trip possible and then asked if I wanted to join him. The meetings that Chris Harlan sets up with previous students who traveled before was also very helpful.

I feel that the resources are adequate. Using our own research to find a placement is the most effective way.

UNC Study Abroad Office was helpful.

I feel that students who really want to make this experience happen will find a way to make it happen. I think that when advertising the class-it needs to be stressed that you will still be able to find a job...you just have to plan accordingly. I also think that resources for financial planning would be helpful. I struggled to get the money together.

**Skills Development**

Most students worked with a nurse as a mentor, but some did not. Students reported a number of skills developed or improved upon:

- Participation as a member of a health care team
- Patient communication/therapeutic relationships: patience, tolerance, appreciation
- Organization and management skills
- Taking a patient history
- Physical assessment
- Health education with teens
- Working with an interpreter
- Assisting with labor and delivery
- Assisting with suturing and wound dressing
- Giving IM and SQ injections
- Starting IVs and preparing IV medications, including chemotherapy
- Improving upon or learning a new language
- Setting up and breaking down mobile clinics quickly
Professional Development

What aspect of the experience benefited your professional development?

- Appreciation for all aspects of the US healthcare system, cultural understanding and tolerance, how to comfort someone without using language.

- The experience substantially influenced my professional growth in many ways. I learned the art of non-verbal communication, a skill that I will use every day during my nursing practice. I also learned a great deal about treating patients holistically vs pharmacologically. I will integrate this knowledge into my nursing practice and will treat patients as a whole instead of just treating the problem they present with.

- The entire experience was challenging and really pushed me to grow as a person. Speaking, doing and thinking everything in a language that is not your own is very taxing. Also, taking on a number of responsibilities within a medical setting in a different language, with little supervision led me to be very resourceful and confident in my skills. I am much more comfortable taking vitals manually, and much more confident performing in a clinical setting here in the US. If I could perform well in a Spanish-speaking country with few resources, I should be able to do at least as well here!

- I believe that the outstanding characteristics were being able to use my nursing skills in a foreign country, trusting my ability to communicate in a second language, and forging new relationships with patients through body language instead of relying completely upon spoken word communication.

Additional US based work

A few students in the 2014 cohort worked in the US in addition to going abroad. But over the years the majority of students have not done so. Those who have chosen to work in the US state that the 2 experiences complemented each other and provided an excellent opportunity to compare health systems.

- My time abroad showed me that I needed to continue to practice communication and time-management skills; my time working as a CNA has certainly challenged me to further develop and practice time-management skills as well as priority setting.

- I definitely feel much calmer in clinical situations. I feel I can read people well and work to make patients feel as comfortable as possible when we work together.
• Since returning to work in a hospital here, I have had 2 Spanish speaking patients and even the little bit that I know makes them feel more comfortable. I’ve been complimented on speaking Spanish by both patients and their families.

Course Evaluation

• The course design is well suited to the content.

• Overall the course was a great experience that I would not trade for the world.

• I absolutely loved the course!

• I really enjoyed the course. I liked how it gives the opportunity to experience health care outside the US. I think it’s a great experience that more people should do.

• I really enjoyed the way the course was structured. Sort of annoying to find Internet in a country where it isn’t readily available, but I understand the reasoning for the forum posts that were due ‘in-country”. It took a few days to find Internet but it was doable.

• Ask other faculty to talk about volunteering abroad. Thus far we have heard from other students saying that it enriched their clinical experience, but are there other faculty that feel the same way? Did it help them in their nursing practice?

• This class is very well organized and a great opportunity for all students.

• Do what you can to lessen the requirements. I was relaxed about it but people were upset about N487 students having significantly less required of them.

Other Comments

• Important to emphasize that you can go abroad and get a job too. I think a lot more people would be interested in participating in N 489 if they knew that.

• I recommend that students choosing N489 go through an established organization. I think it is a lot harder and stressful to plan a trip all by yourself. Having an organization get the logistics in order makes the whole experience a lot more enjoyable and you have the opportunity to travel with students from other universities.
• Such a great summer! Traveling was something I greatly needed at this point in the curriculum and I learned so much.

• HIGHLY recommend going with one friend or an organization that will place you in living situations with other healthcare volunteers.

• Thank you for all your support during our travels. It was so wonderful to be able to chat with others traveling at the same time and to see how our experiences differed from one another and yet to see the similarities even though we were in different clinical settings and in very diverse cultures. This class was definitely a highlight of the nursing program!

• I had a great time on this trip. It went smoothly and I feel like I learned a lot about myself as a person and it gave me a lot of confidence in nursing. It was the first time I have traveled alone and I can’t wait to travel again next summer. Thanks for helping set up this program.

• I would like to thank the SON for having this program.