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The Legacy of IROP: Giving back the gift of Mentorship

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commentaries

The Legacy of IROP: Giving back the gift of mentorship

—Elizabeth R. Gagnon

As a young professional, my first experience serving as a mentor came three years after being mentored myself as a student participating in UNH's International Research Opportunities Program (IROP). Mentorship is a critical component of the program and is the aspect that I believe makes it a unique opportunity for undergraduate students. Not only does IROP award the student the financial means to pursue research, the program also ensures the student's success by establishing mentors in the U.S. and abroad. My own positive experiences with IROP are what have led to my recent service as a mentor.

I was awarded an IROP grant to travel to Tanzania during the summer of 2001. This experience turned out to be a pivotal event in my life in terms of choosing a career path. Unlike many students who pursue research in their major field of study, I used the IROP to learn about a new field, public health, for which UNH did not have a curriculum at the time of my matriculation.

I applied for IROP the semester after returning from a study abroad program in Tanzania. I had gone to Tanzania to study wildlife ecology and conservation as part of my Zoology major curriculum. While I went there to study the animals, I was most fascinated by the people. I developed many friendships there, and these new friends candidly asked me why westerners come to see and help the animals when the people are living in poverty and suffering from curable, preventable diseases. I didn't have a satisfying answer for that question and it prompted me to return to Tanzania in some way that would be useful to the people.

At about this same time I was developing an interest in medicine, which grew from studying science. Being in Tanzania exposed me to important public health problems and I decided that applying for an IROP grant to go back to Tanzania to study a public health issue would help me learn about the field. I developed a project proposal to look at health-seeking behavior and Malaria and was fortunate enough to receive a grant from the program.

I was hardly back in Tanzania a month before I was sending away for School of Public Health graduate catalogs. Going through the entire process of developing a hypothesis and survey instrument, writing a grant, interviewing research subjects, and analyzing the data really allowed me to get a full sense of public health research. I fell in love with the field that summer. But even more importantly than that, IROP provided a whole slew of firsts that gave me an edge over my fellow undergraduate students. IROP was my first experience with mentorship, grant writing, scientific presentation, survey design, and obtaining Institutional Review Board



approval for human subjects research. I learned a tremendous amount. IROP continued to support this growth even after I completed my project by providing funding to attend a national conference to present my findings.

After graduating from UNH in 2002 with a B.S. in Zoology and a B.A. in English, I went to Emory University in Atlanta, GA to pursue a Master of Public Health degree. I graduated from Emory in December 2003 and returned to New Hampshire to do public health work here. I now work for the state as a foodborne disease epidemiologist. My IROP experience continues to resonate still even here in my professional life. Recently a NH high school student approached our office looking for a mentor to assist her with an epidemiology scholarship for which she wanted to apply. It required developing an epidemiology project and writing the results with the guidance of a mentor working in the field. I was happy to take on that role. I had learned from my experience with IROP how important an interested and committed mentor is and in many ways it was an opportunity for me to return the gift of mentorship I had received.

My new mentee was very interested in Africa and health issues pertinent to that area of the world. I told her about my experiences in Tanzania, describing the research I had pursued through IROP. I had never done anything formal with the data I had collected on Malaria while in Tanzania, so I offered her this data to work with. I was happy to see that it might be useful to someone else. The very generous contribution of an IROP donor not only gave me an unforgettable learning experience but has now also provided another young person with an opportunity to learn about a brand new field that she may one day want to pursue as a career. IROP is a gift that keeps on giving.

Over the course of the next seven months, my mentee and I worked together defining her project and our relationship. Being on the other side of the mentor-mentee relationship has been educational. I can now appreciate the challenges and rewards that serving as a mentor presents. I wonder what will become of my mentee. Is it possible that perhaps I have helped inspire a future U.S. Surgeon General? She is a bright girl and destined for success.

Throughout the course of our work together, I often found myself surprised that I was the one being looked to for answers when it seemed like just yesterday that I was the one asking the questions. It is really a very cyclical process in that most mentors have been mentored in the past and mentees often go on to become mentors themselves. It is a legacy, a kind of inheritance that goes on as an exchange of wisdom and “lessons learned” to support the intellectual and professional growth of young people. And while most of our exchange was me teaching her, the greatest moment was when, towards the end of her project, she expanded her thinking and exceeded my own realm of thought. “I hadn’t thought of that.” Those are rewarding words to say to a 15-year-old girl.

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Author Bio

Elizabeth R. Gagnon graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 2002 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Zoology and a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. After graduation from UNH, she attended Emory University in Atlanta, GA where she earned her Master of Public Health degree in Epidemiology and worked as a microbiologist for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A native of Manchester, NH, Elizabeth currently works for the State of New Hampshire Division of Public Health Services as a Communicable Disease Epidemiologist where she is responsible for the investigation of foodborne outbreaks and disease surveillance. She remains connected to the UNH community through her volunteer work with the Durham Ambulance Corps, which provides emergency medical services to the communities of Durham, Lee, Madbury, and UNH.