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Traversing Islands of Experience: How Undergraduate Research Helped Me Navigate through Graduate School and Beyond

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commentary

Traversing Islands of Experience: How Undergraduate Research Helped Me Navigate through Graduate School and Beyond

—Kelli Swazey (Edited by Brigid C. Casellini)

To say that UROP has taken me places isn't just to employ an old cliché.

Since completing a semester of research with support from the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) in 2004, I have crossed the globe from the Atlantic to the Pacific and to Southeast Asia and back again doing research on my own transnational ethnographic project. Now, situated at the “gateway of the Pacific” in Honolulu, where I am finishing my master’s degree in anthropology at the University of Hawai’i Manoa, I live in an environment where the cultural influences of the Pacific islands, the countries of Asia and beyond are woven into everyday life. Morning bus rides are a cacophony of languages I’ve learned to identify—the staccato of gossip in Tagalog, the gentle murmur of two elderly Japanese women greeting each other good morning, a casual phrase in Hawai’ian Pidgin English containing words drawn from a handful of other tongues. I never would have gotten here without the skills that the UROP program helps to foster.



My journey began in New Hampshire, in an anthropological methods course taught by Professor Deborah Winslow. It was a requirement that all students develop their own ethnographic research projects and complete a proposal for funding from UROP. As Professor Winslow was well aware, perhaps the most important skill for an anthropologist to learn is how to conceptualize and then clearly explain a research project to a funding agency. Planning, writing, and refining research proposals and grant applications are crucial skills for any anthropologist to develop whether she works in an academic or applied field. As I discovered, no matter how interesting a project or how detailed the data, if you can’t communicate the overall picture of your work to those outside of your field, you won’t be able to secure the funds necessary to see your project realized.

The author wearing a traditional kebaya in North Sulawesi during a celebration of the city of Manado's birthday

Inspired by work I had done under the tutelage of Professor Nina Glick Schiller with immigrant families in New Hampshire, I developed a research project investigating a number of churches started by Indonesian immigrants in the area. Working with Professor Glick Schiller as an advocate for a family whose efforts to flee the war-torn nation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo were stymied by US immigration law constituted an epiphany in my personal and professional life. I realized that the anthropological perspective served as a powerful tool in translating different cultural and social realities, and in underscoring the need for political change.

On returning from travels in Southeast Asia to a post 9/11 America, I was struck by people's ignorance of places like Indonesia that were identified as "Muslim" countries. I felt that research with the predominantly Christian Indonesian community in New Hampshire would help to provide a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between religion and national identity. With research funding from the Hamel Center, I was able to spend a semester doing ethnographic fieldwork with the Indonesian community. In time, my research grew to much more than just a required project for Professor Winslow's class.

The ties I made with the Indonesian community in New Hampshire, and the skills I honed by preparing a research project and funding proposal through UROP, have been central to my continued success studying anthropology. I have become part of the history of New Hampshire's Indonesian Christian community as it unfolds, participating in ceremonies and celebrations and documenting the growth of these organizations as much for the people I work with as for the development of my own project. Various churches have used my research to document the importance of their indigenous Christian practices in support of their continued use of these practices in American Christian institutions. My connections with these individuals and the UROP funding, both of which culminated in my honors senior thesis at the University of New Hampshire, encouraged me to apply for a graduate research fellowship in anthropology from the National Science Foundation. I am certain that receiving this three-year fellowship, one of the most competitive and prestigious in the country, was a direct result of my undergraduate research experience. Few undergraduates can write a fellowship proposal that cites their own research results.

As a result, I have had an advantage in almost all aspects of my graduate career thus far. In the classroom, I'm often one of the few M.A. students who have already written successful funding proposals and seen an ethnographic project through to completion. I've been able to expand my project beyond the Indonesian Christian community in New Hampshire by traveling to their hometown in North Sulawesi to do historical and ethnographic research on the development of their ethnic identity. Christianity is part of the broader ethnic history of Minahasans, just as Islam is of many other Indonesian ethnic groups; the two are not separate entities. For me, a complete understanding of how a group positions itself within the transnational environment is dependent on a proper understanding of its ethnic history. The months I spent in Sulawesi living with a family of local government officials deepened my understanding not only of the region and the identity known as *Minahasa*, but of the cultural and political concerns of Indonesians in New Hampshire through the context of their ethnic history.



The author and several generations of Minahasan women from the family she lived with in North Sulawesi

Like the lives of those who have migrated to New Hampshire, my research stretches across national boundaries and cultural worlds. Last year I traveled from Hawai'i to North Sulawesi and south to the State University of Gorontalo to present preliminary findings at a conference, and then flew back to New Hampshire to document a meeting of the Protestant Indonesian Churches Association of America, all in an effort to trace the connections of these fascinating lives lived "across borders."

The UROP program started me down a path I scarcely could have imagined. Now, writing my master's thesis with all of the rich data I've collected from a number of sites around the world, I again feel that I have an advantage. Most importantly, I have been able to realize a coveted dream in anthropology: to have the time and resources to develop far-ranging, long-term, and meaningful connections with the people I research. This enables me to undertake projects that are significant not just to anthropology as a discipline but also to the people I work with.

For the New Hampshire Indonesians whom I write about, that I've learned to speak their language, know their history, and communicate their situation to a wider audience makes our relationship mutually beneficial. Our work together has helped me develop a plan for the next stage, when I hope to do dissertation research in North Sulawesi on issues related to how beliefs surrounding the regional ethnic identity have helped to maintain peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians, an important topic internationally and in my informants' lives. As I work on yet another proposal for dissertation funding, I can't help but remain grateful that a semester's worth of funding from the UROP program has lasted so long and taken me so far.

Kelli Swazey is currently a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellow.

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Author Bio

*Alumna **Kelli Swazey** graduated from the University of New Hampshire summa cum laude in 2005 with a B.S. in anthropology. Currently at the University of Hawai'i Manoa completing her master's degree, she is a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellow and an editor of Explorations, the University's graduate journal of Southeast Asian Studies. She is also an East West Center student affiliate in the Department of Anthropology.*

Kelli began investigating New Hampshire's Indonesian Christian community in 2003, and will complete this phase of her research when she defends her master's thesis at the University of Hawai'i Manoa in spring 2008. "Research is always a challenging and invigorating process," she says. "It's certainly not always fun; there is a lot of hard work and as an anthropologist flexibility is a must. But it's usually always fascinating." Kelli hopes her commentary will "encourage other students to have faith in their abilities to contribute to the academic conversation and to the communities around them by engaging in research through the UROP program." She will continue to focus on Indonesian Christians as she pursues her Ph.D.

Mentor Bio

***Deborah Winslow**, associate professor of anthropology, served as Kelli's faculty mentor for her UROP research project and has been teaching at the University of New Hampshire for thirty years. She specializes in economic anthropology and South Asia, particularly Sri Lanka. Dr. Winslow "learned a great deal about Indonesians in New Hampshire" through Kelli, and notes that Kelli's research also showed her just how much a determined, motivated individual can accomplish. "Kelli Swazey is an extraordinary researcher, student, and human being," said Winslow.*