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Dain LaRoche Assistant Professor, Department of Kinesiology CHHS travels to Brazil

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Dain LaRoche

Assistant Professor, Department of Kinesiology - College of Health and Human Services

Professor LaRoche traveled to Brazil in January 2012 for research on neuromuscular performance and mobility in older adults at the Universidade Estadual Paulista – Rio Claro.

With the support of the Center for International Education, I traveled to Rio Claro, São Paulo, Brazil to work with Professor Dr. Mauro Gonçalves, Professor Dr. Adalgiso Cardozo, and their graduate students in the Laboratório de Biomecânica at the Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP). The purpose of this visit was to share our respective research findings, develop a collaborative project on the role of leg strength and the biomechanics of gait in the elderly, and to foster exchange between our two programs. I left Durham with no working knowledge of the Portuguese language and no clear idea of what I would encounter in Rio Claro. What I found were some of the most gracious people I've ever met, hardworking and intelligent graduate students, motivated mentors, and a quality educational system with aspirations of international recognition.

Rio Claro is a small city nearly a three hour drive north of the city of São Paulo — a trip reminiscent of the plains of the western U.S., with rolling hills and vast expanses of sugar cane. In São Paulo state there was evidence of economic growth including shiny new cars, building of a new stadium for the 2014 soccer World Cup, and two new academic buildings on the UNESP campus.

One of those buildings will be a new biomechanics laboratory, complete with the most modern equipment, to house Professor Gonçalves' developing program. In addition to the physical signs of economic growth, there are a number of Brazilian programs that provide funding to graduate students to complete a portion of their studies outside of Brazil. It is our hope that some of the students from UNESP will choose to use these scholarships to conduct research in our laboratory at UNH.

During my visit I gave two research presentations related to lower-extremity strength, the forces generated during walking, body composition, and mobility in older adults. Also, each graduate student presented their current research including the ability of gait variability to predict elderly fallers, and how altered gait influences the energy cost of walking in the elderly. I spent the majority of my time at UNESP having small group discussions centered on research design, data and statistical analysis, and interpretation of study findings. I was very impressed by the volume and breadth of research that was being conducted in the laboratory and that each student was preparing a manuscript in English for publication in an international journal.



Professor LaRoche presents his research at UNESP



Professor LaRoche presents his research at UNESP

I would be less than authentic if I did not admit that my favorite part of the trip was learning about the culture of Brazil, trying new foods, and making new friendships. Had I not gone to Brazil I might have never known that Rio is pronounced "Hio", avocados grow in trees, you can make juice from the fruit of a cashew, and farmers crossing a river with piranha send the oldest cow first. My hosts invited me into their houses and lives, treated me like a king, and made me feel more than welcome. Some of my favorite excursions included a walk through the town's historical eucalyptus forest and trip outside town to a student's family cabin. During the latter adventure, I did not know where we were headed and we suddenly pulled off the road into a lemon grove. We drove down a dirt road overlooking a valley to the cabin complete with gazebo, pool, and wood fired grill. We rode horses through the orchard (I got the mule), ate cassava, corn meal, and boar, and tasted the sweetness of sugar cane straight from the source.

I hope sharing these experiences with my students will inspire them to travel, learn new languages, and realize that despite little differences, people are the same wherever you go. I take away from this trip an appreciation of Brazilian history and culture, fresh ideas for research, new research partners, and a future of scientific and cultural exchange between UNESP and UNH.





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