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Spring 2016, Gilman Scholarships Broaden Cultural and Academic Horizons

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UNH Global

Gilman Scholarships Broaden Cultural and Academic Horizons

Tuesday, March 1, 2016

Shannon McGrath '18, an occupational therapy major from Lyman, New Hampshire, knew that she wanted to challenge herself with a different type of study abroad experience than what she would gain from going to a more traditional destination. Hoping to learn more about the diverse ethnic groups, identities, and local languages in West Africa, she chose a study abroad program at the University of Ghana in Legon, Ghana. For her, the University of Ghana seemed like the perfect fit, given that the

program allowed her not only to gain a new cultural perspective on the themes that she had explored for her minor in Race & Ethnicity Studies but also to determine whether she would like to return to the area in the future as a member of the Peace Corps.

The purposeful connections that Shannon drew between her academic interests at UNH, the study abroad program at the University of Ghana, and her future goals helped her to win a prestigious **Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship** (<http://www.unh.edu/fellowships-office/benjamin-gilman-international-scholarship>) for the spring 2016 semester along with three other UNH undergraduate students. Shannon was beyond thrilled to learn that she had received the scholarship, which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and



Shannon McGrath '18 (l.) with friends in Ghana

Cultural Affairs and awards grantees – who must be on Federal Pell Grants – up to \$5,000 to apply towards their study abroad or internship program costs. As the mission of the Gilman Scholarship is to diversify the students who study and intern abroad (and the countries and regions where they go), students like Shannon who have demonstrated an interest in truly broadening their cultural and academic horizons are particularly competitive for the scholarship.

In the last several years, UNH has seen a great increase in the number of undergraduate students applying to and receiving the Gilman Scholarships due to the committed partnership of the Office of National Fellowships, the Center for International Education and Global Engagement, and the COLA Center for Study Abroad. Ten UNH students received Gilman Scholarships to study or intern abroad between the summer of 2015 and the spring of 2016, going all over the world to countries like Costa Rica, Tanzania, China, Senegal, and Russia. This increase in the number of Gilman applicants, as well as the increased diversity of their chosen study abroad destinations, reflects UNH's new international priorities, which include the goal of significantly increasing the annual number of students studying abroad.

Indeed, for many of UNH's Gilman Scholars, the experience of studying abroad has been life-changing. Only a few months into her program in Ghana, Shannon already speaks to how eye-opening her experience has been, as she has gained a "whole new sense of freedom" and perspective on everything from cultural norms to human relationships with – and attitudes toward – technology and the environment. She is also beginning volunteer work in Accra at the New Horizon Special School, which is a school for individuals with disabilities, and she believes that such volunteer work will not only give her important practical experience but also offer her the opportunity to gain insight into the practice of occupational therapy in a new cultural framework.

The experience of studying abroad on a Gilman Scholarship has, importantly, shaped students' academic and professional trajectories at UNH and beyond. Gabby Aguilera '15, a Russian and Justice Studies major, studied in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in the summer of 2014 as a Gilman Scholar. While in Bishkek, she not only served as a Global Experience Blogger for Gilman but also started teaching English at a language school. As she remarked, "In a twist of fate, I realized that I absolutely loved (teaching)." Inspired by her experience in Kyrgyzstan, she applied – and was selected – for a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship (ETA) grant, and she is now teaching English in the Republic of Georgia.



Cory McKenzie '15 in Japan

Another UNH '15 alum and Gilman Scholar Cory McKenzie spent his senior year at Saitama University in Saitama, Japan, where he studied Japanese language and literature, read historical Japanese texts for his research, and visited historic sites. His deep interest in Japanese culture, politics, and history led him to be selected for the prestigious Junior Fellows Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, D.C., following his graduation from UNH. Working as a research assistant on the Japan Studies project,

Cory has written research papers on the history of the U.S.-Japanese alliance since the end of the Cold War that will be used by the Carnegie's senior associates. For both Gabby and Cory, their study abroad experiences shaped their professional aspirations while also making them more competitive for such prestigious fellowships as the Fulbright and the Carnegie Junior Fellows program.

Gilman Scholars share a desire to further promote the importance of international experiences among their peers, thereby inspiring others to take advantage of similar opportunities for personal, academic, and professional growth. Upon their return from study abroad, Gilman Scholars are required to carry out a follow-on service project in order to promote international education and the Gilman Scholarship. These projects vary, but they all seek to encourage students who might think that study abroad is not an option for them due to particular financial, personal, or academic factors to see international experiences as a feasible – and important – pursuit. While in Saitama, Cory kept a blog for the Reach the World program and was also paired with a high school class in Nebraska, with whom he shared his experiences and research interests over Skype. After Cory found an English translation of the story of the legendary Japanese hero Yuriwaka, the high school teacher assigned it to her class for reading. As Cory bemusedly remarks, “It was very exciting to see Yuriwaka appear in a Nebraska high school’s curriculum!” Through projects like Cory’s, the Gilman Scholarship Program aims to reach and inspire other students to study abroad and consider more nontraditional destinations.

Cory, Gabby, and now Shannon all express their gratitude for how study abroad – with the support of the Gilman Scholarship – has furthered their professional development, deepened their cultural understanding, and positively altered their worldview. They represent an increasing number of UNH students who see the great benefits in not only studying abroad but also following their passion wherever it takes them. Most certainly, their future is international in scope.

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OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS & SCHOLARS

 Conant Hall 315
10 Library Way, Durham, NH 03824

 603.862.1288

 [oiss@unh.edu \(mailto:oiss@unh.edu\)](mailto:oiss@unh.edu)

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