

Throughout my undergraduate career, I have used my talents as a leader in various ways. I have served as a founding executive board member of one of the largest honor organizations on campus, inspired other students to volunteer abroad by sharing my own experiences regarding medical volunteer work in rural Nicaragua, motivated fellow peers to gain a genuine understanding of genetics through my efforts as a Learning Assistant, and involved myself heavily with cancer research. During the fall semester of my junior year, I volunteered to serve as a First-Year Interest Group Seminar (FIGS) peer instructor.

Being a FIGS peer instructor has been one of my most memorable leadership experiences. My participation in the program encapsulated a peculiar fusion of the many skills that can be acquired through leadership: academic prowess, creativity, and community outreach. As a FIGS peer instructor, I independently planned and taught a course on the topic of “Health and Medicine” to a group of twenty-five freshman students. I genuinely valued the opportunity to hold a semester long conversation with healthcare professionals of the future. Throughout the semester, I introduced my students to careers in healthcare, public health, and research while emphasizing that they should explore interests in the liberal arts and social sciences as well. Soon enough, my students began to share my pride of being a Scarlet Knight and enthusiasm for belonging to the diverse and enriching environment that is fostered by the Rutgers community.

Together, my students and I discussed healthcare issues including the lack of incentive to develop orphan drugs and the need to develop culturally competent medical practitioners. For instance, I gave my students a scenario in which they witnessed the practice of “mother roasting” while they were serving as volunteer physicians in Cambodia. I described the seemingly bizarre practice which involves post-labor females sweating profusely as they lie on a bamboo bed over a fire fueled by charcoal and asked my students what they would do after witnessing such an

event. Most students assumed that such a practice was unhealthy and devised methods to respectfully approach the community leaders regarding the effects of “mother roasting”. Needless to say, students were surprised to learn that “mother roasting” is a beneficial practice. Through such exercises, I desired to harvest an open-mindedness in my students that they would confidently propagate to their own peers.

During the semester, I provided opportunities for students to connect with professors and arranged an exciting out of class excursion. On one occasion, public health instructor and certified addictions counselor Alexandra Lopez spoke to my class about addiction. Students were surprised to learn that addiction involves a genetic component along with physiological changes in the body and should not necessarily be considered a moral failing, but rather, a disease. I hoped to increase my students’ capacities to feel empathy towards all human beings by having a knowledgeable individual speak passionately about her often stigmatized patients. Moreover, I organized a tour of the Rutgers University Cell and DNA Repository (RUCDR) led by Dr. Tischfield. The RUCDR is the largest university based repository in the world. Highlights of the tour included a glimpse of the robotics used in order to manipulate DNA samples as well as the opportunity to safely immerse a hand into a liquid nitrogen tank. Anxiety quickly faded when students realized that Dr. Tischfield (director of the Human Genetics Institute of New Jersey, founder of the RUCDR, Professor and Chair of the Genetics department of Rutgers, and Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School) has a very easy going and approachable personality even though he is an extremely brilliant man. Through this experience, I hoped to ignite an appreciation for research in my students while also encouraging them to approach faculty members, no matter how “untouchable” they may seem.

My involvement with the FIGS program has been outstandingly enriching. What was once a room full of strangers on the first day of class turned into a supportive community and

learning environment. I felt genuinely privileged to get to know my students not only by name, but by aspirations and character as well. It was extremely pleasing to be able to use my leadership skills in order to personally ensure that each of my students gained a thorough understanding of professions in the health care realm and the confidence to pursue their passions. I still remain in close contact with many students who continue to seek my mentorship and wholeheartedly support the FIGS program by volunteering to help new peer instructors develop engaging curricula. Although I only had intentions of reaching out to others when becoming a peer instructor, I myself, have also benefitted from being an instructor. By teaching material, I became more knowledgeable in the subjects we studied. I developed confidence in my public speaking skills as well as the humility to admit when I am unsure of an answer and the willingness to search for a solution. Whether it be new knowledge of a culture or exciting news about breakthrough research, I honestly learned something from each of my students.

In the future, I hope to continue using my leadership skills in order to fulfill my social responsibilities and positively influence the lives of individuals both locally and abroad. In fact, this June I will begin a six month volunteering stint with a non-governmental organization in rural Xerem, Brazil where I will be promoting social justice for orphaned children. The skills that I have developed while serving the local community at Rutgers University will allow me to confidently contribute ideas to the communities abroad while maintaining a high level of cultural awareness. I am immeasurably grateful for the wonderfully diverse experiences that Rutgers University has nurtured me with and will perpetually strive to “pay it forward” by extending my ever-growing insights, knowledge, and support to the local community.