A Compelling New Approach to Studying Public Health

A sociology program draws aspiring medical students and science majors

Neha Sikka has a clear calling: the Rutgers junior wants to become a physician and work in the developing world for groups like Doctors without Borders and the International Red Cross.

A whiz in math and science, she’s studying biomedical engineering and mulling over medical schools. But at the School of Arts and Sciences, Sikka has discovered a program that’s complementing and expanding her premed studies, exposing her to some of the most challenging issues facing health care professionals in the 21st century.

She’s among the first wave of students to enroll in the Department of Sociology’s new minor: health and society. In courses like "The Sociology of Medicine and Health Care," Sikka is discovering how poverty, stress, and other factors can cause illness and disease. And she’s also confronting the challenges patients face in getting access to quality, affordable health care.

"It’s eye-opening," Sikka says. "Medical studies tend to be very focused on the internal. But in sociology you get the external, and I think that’s crucial for effective patient care."

The minor, which follows Rutgers’ recent transformation into a major center of health science education, reflects the department’s longtime focus on medical sociology, a specialty in which the relationship between humans and health is studied from many different angles.

"Because I’m a medical sociologist, I teach about issues such as health and inequality, and the relationship between gender and health—even in my ‘Introduction to Sociology’ course," explains department chair Deborah Carr, who worked with sociology colleagues to design the minor. "For years, I’ve had undergraduates say to me: ‘I’m a science major, but I love learning about the social—(continued inside)"
John Sivolella found support, friendship, and academic fulfillment at Rutgers University, it felt like a bright new beginning.

Arriving for his first year at Rutgers, he was stunned by the array of possibilities: more than two dozen language offerings, a strong linguistics department, a robust Study Abroad program, and a highly diverse, constantly evolving student population that serves as a rich source of new vocabulary as well as a means to practice.

"The number of options at Rutgers is pretty amazing," Yeaton says. There was even a fledgling language exchange club started by students—Rutgers Lingua—in which participants meet at Alexander Library and learn languages directly from native-speaking students.

There’s a large Chinese population at Rutgers that speaks the dialect I want to learn," Yeaton says. "They come to practice their English, and I come to improve my Chinese."

Living in an honors residence, Brett Hall, was also a benefit. "A lot of housemates were studying foreign languages, so there was ample opportunity to practice," he says.

Yeaton graduates in 2015 with a double major in French and linguistics, and a minor in Chinese. He has studied in Paris and Beijing, conducted linguistic research projects, and won third place in a regional Chinese proficiency contest. He’s considering careers in academia and in government.

But whatever he decides, the appeal of learning a language, especially its linguistic quirks, is enduring.

"There are some languages, for example, where the structure makes everything in the passive voice, like: ‘The seal is killed by the hunter,’ Yeaton says. ‘That’s obviously different from the way we might see the world, but it makes you reflect and gives you new ways to express ideas.’"
Robert Kopp builds a multidisciplinary response to climate change

As a student, Robert Kopp was fascinated with astrobiology, a field that poses big questions about life on other planets. But he also found himself drawn to questions about life on this planet, including questions like: are humans reshaping climate in a way that could be catastrophic for civilization? “I became interested in the Earth and how it evolved over time,” says the 32-year-old professor of Earth and planetary sciences in the School of Arts and Sciences. “And it became clear to me that as a society we have critical challenges to deal with.”

Last year Kopp and other geoscientists at Rutgers and Tufts universities warned that the sea-level rise will likely cause storms to bring unprecedented flooding to the Jersey shore by the middle of the 21st century. But Kopp’s engagement with climate change transcends any single area of study. He has become an influential public scholar, bringing a multidisciplinary response to climate change. He approaches his roles—as teacher, researcher, and policy adviser—with a strong sense of the importance of getting science to inform policy. “Humanity has become one of the most powerful geological forces on the planet,” Kopp says. “We have to develop the decision-making capabilities appropriate for a planetary civilization, or we are going to end up making life unpleasant for ourselves and potentially untenable for our grandchildren.”

He recently served as lead scientist for the technical report underlying the Risky Business project organized by former New York City mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, former U.S. treasury secretary Henry Paulson, and the philanthropist and former hedge fund manager Tom Steyer. The report drew widespread media coverage with its prediction that unmitigated climate change would have a devastating impact on America’s economy, including large-scale loss of coastal property, reduced labor productivity, and shifting crop yields and agricultural patterns.

For Kopp, an important aspect of this experience was working alongside economists. Prior to coming to Rutgers, he was involved in similar collaborative experiences, including a stint as a fellow at the U.S. Department of Energy. “What I learned in government is that science is just one of many inputs into policymaking,” he says. “Learning how to talk to social scientists is an important part of getting science to inform policy.”

It’s no surprise Kopp is involved in policy. His mother is a former Maryland legislator and the current state treasurer. His father served for years as an attorney in the U.S. Department of Justice. “I was raised in an environment saturated in policy discussions,” the Bel Air, Maryland, native says. At Rutgers, his course, “Building and Maintaining an Habitable Planet,” draws a broad cross-section of undergraduates with its examination of climate issues. And as associate director of the Rutgers Energy Institute, he helps integrate the university’s expertise in science, engineering, economics, and public policy toward the goal of decarbonizing the global energy system.

The abundance of scholars at Rutgers offers hope for the future, he says: “You have a couple dozen faculty members whose work touches on coastal climate resilience and dozens of others working on climate and energy systems. I am sure there are not many institutions in the world where you have that many scholars stretching the entire research chain.”
minored in French. “My French minor really helped me develop as a writer,” she says. “I was exposed to so many great authors, and I also came away with an understanding of French theater.”

The department has long been ahead of the curve. Rutgers was the first public university in the United States to partner with France’s most celebrated museum, the Louvre. This year the French faculty is unveiling a new winter intersession program—three weeks in Aix-en-Provence for students with limited French experience.

Mark Busch, a 1964 Rutgers graduate and prominent New Jersey attorney, offered an additional advantage to majoring in French. “I fell in love with the language and culture,” he says. “And I soon discovered that reading, analyzing, and expressing ideas in a language not your own is superb preparation for law school.”

But better way to communicate the joys of French? On Rutgers Day, as scores of people walked through campus, checking out dazzling displays of science, technology, and art, professor Mary Shaw was ready with a question. “Would you like to take a cheese test?” she asked passersby on Voorhees Mall.

Standing behind her, a handful of undergraduates and a fellow faculty member from the Department of French speedily sliced mounds of cheese into bite-sized pieces to be placed on toothpicks.

The “cheese test,” better known as “Fromage Frenzy,” a Rutgers Day staple attraction, challenges participants to sample five types of cheese and then identify them based on written descriptions. At day’s end, more than 600 people had taken the test, consuming nearly 5 kilos of cheese.

“This is one part of French culture that everyone loves,” Shaw says. “But the spirit of French fun did not end at Rutgers Day. Nor was it limited to cheese. This year the department in the School of Arts and Sciences held its first ever French at Rutgers Week, beginning on Rutgers Day and continuing with poetry readings, film screenings, and even a Renaissance fencing demonstration.”

“Having a week of this or a week of that—it’s a very French concept,” Shaw explains. The showcasing of French culture provided a glimpse into French studies at Rutgers, where professors are known for their scholarship but also for their fun, hip, and creative approach to teaching about all things French. “We strive to be original,” says department chair Carole Allamand. Indeed, in addition to courses in history, literature, and language, students take intriguing seminars like “French and Francophone Comics” (François Cornilliat), “Songs of Modern France” (Uri Eisenzweig), and “Cultures of Taste” (Ana Pairet).

Daniel Stornetta, a senior majoring in French and biological sciences, raves about professor Alan Williams’s courses in French cinema. “French filmmaking tackles so many serious subjects,” Stornetta says. “It’s wonderful to be able to study it at Rutgers.”

At the department’s core is a deep commitment to literature. “Many of us are active writers,” says Allamand, a published novelist. “Our strength and originality is a deep involvement with language, fiction, and storytelling.”

That strength draws students like Jennifer Smith, a 2014 SAS graduate who majored in English and minored in French. “My French minor really helped me develop as a writer,” she says. “I was exposed to so many great authors, and I also came away with an understanding of French theater.”

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New Generation of Students Connect with French

Food, theater, and film are all part of the experience — content extraction...
Health Professions Office guides students on the journey to med school

Everybody who walks through our door has a different problem, a different story, a unique set of circumstances. Our job is to help them make the right decisions.

SUPPORTING THE NEXT GENERATION OF MEDICAL STUDENTS

Najin Jain figured Rutgers would be “a piece of cake” on the way to medical school. But after a humbling first year, he began having doubts. “My GPA wasn’t competitive for medical school,” Jain says. “I was considering doing a LEV into business finance.”

Enter the Rutgers Health Professions Office (HPO), a dedicated group of advisors who’ve prepared thousands of Rutgers students for competition in the battleground of medical school admissions.

After a frank discussion with the HPO staff, Jain devised a comeback plan. It included a focus on time management skills and better study habits. Last spring he graduated magna cum laude from the School of Arts and Sciences. And after a gap-year working at the New Jersey Department of Health, he wants to apply to medical schools and pursue a career in emergency medicine.

“I owe a lot to the HPO,” Jain says. “They were quite candid about the fact that I was in a tough spot, and helped me sort out exactly what I needed to do.”

For longtime HPO director Bruce Babiarz, an SAS professor in the Department of Cell Biology and Neuroscience, it’s all in a day’s work. “Everybody who walks through our door has a different problem, a different story, a unique set of circumstances,” he says. “Our job is to help them make the right decisions.”

The HPO, part of the SAS Division of Life Sciences, was founded in 1988 by W. Robert Jenkins, a now-retired professor of biological sciences. The office currently has about 3,000 students on its rolls—twice the number it had in the late 1990s. Each year advisors work with up to 700 students applying to medical and dental schools and other health professions programs.

On any given day, Babiarz, assistant director Elizabeth Vogel, and other staffers advise students on specific courses and sequences, extracurricular and gap year activities, and opportunities for research and clinical experience. The office also oversees physician-shadowing programs, coordinated by Babiarz’s counterpart, the Committee on Institutional Cooperation. On College Avenue, a new honors college and academic building are under construction, and on Busch Campuses, we broke ground on a state-of-the-art chemistry and chemical biology facility. The newly formed Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences, meanwhile, is already a significant new partner for the School of Arts and Sciences.

In fact, this edition of ACCESS explores some of the innovative ways SAS is responding to Rutgers’ transformation into a comprehensive medical school applicant.

In the humanities, the Department of French feature and the interview with the Center for Global Education director show the breadth and depth of SAS’s foreign language programs, which draw students like multilingual prodigy Jeremy Weaton. I hope you’ll enjoy reading the new edition of ACCESS, and I encourage you to get in touch with us to share your reactions, your experience, and your sense of Rutgers pride!

Peter March
Executive Dean

Greetings

It’s been a delightful summer for me—translating to the School of Arts and Sciences, learning my way around Rutgers University—New Brunswick, and getting to know my wonderful new colleagues. They’ve been welcoming, engaging, and supportive, and for that I’m most grateful.

This experience confirmed my initial sense of the attractiveness of joining Rutgers: its people. I’m confident that with such passionate and accomplished students, faculty, staff, and alumni, SAS will soon realize its vision to be the most distinguished school of arts and sciences in the nation.

My next visit of first impression is Rutgers is the astonishing pace of change! We’ve joined the Big Ten and its academic counterpart, the Committee on Institutional Cooperation. On College Avenue, a new honors college and academic building are under construction, and on Busch Campuses, we broke ground on a state-of-the-art chemistry and chemical biology facility. The newly formed Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences, meanwhile, is already a significant new partner for the School of Arts and Sciences.

The stories include the front-page piece on the Department of Sociology’s new health-focused minor and a behind-the-scenes look at the busy Health Professions Office, where SAS professor Bruce Babiarz and his staff help undergraduates become competitive medical school applicants.

Film screenings, poetry readings, and … fencing? It was all part of the fun of French at Rutgers Week 2014! Emilye Baadie, at left, fencing instructor; graduate student from the Department’s annual exchange with the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, and conversation instructor in the College Avenue French Living and Learning and Douglass Global Village Communities during 2013-14, proposed the idea of French Week. Formidable!

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From Microcosm to Cosmos, SAS Science Students Shine

The research accomplishments and academic records of three School of Arts and Sciences students have earned them prestigious Barry M. Goldwater Scholarships, awarded for excellence in mathematics, science, and engineering. Left to right, seniors Alina Rashid of Edison, Kaiser Leull of Maplewood, and Asher Wasserman of Aberdeen are among 283 undergraduates selected by the Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship and Excellence in Education Foundation to receive awards this year. Rashid studies how nerve cells reshape themselves when stressed; Leull makes 3-D models of proteins and uses them to simulate protein interactions; Wasserman focuses on the evolution of galaxies in space.

Mastering the Arts and Sciences

Responding to increased demand for advanced learning opportunities in the humanities and sciences, the School of Arts and Sciences has developed a diverse portfolio of new master’s degree programs.

Applied Economics M.S.: Provides advanced quantitative training for those wanting to understand the role played by economic issues in an increasingly complex and interconnected world (Fall 15).

Computational Imaging and Bio Pharmaceutical Science M.S.: Examines computer-generated image reconstruction as well as clinical research (including drug development), biology of disease, and functional imaging (Fall 15).

East Asian Studies M.A.: Provides an intensive immersion in the literature, visual culture, history, religion, language, and linguistics of the civilizations of China, Japan, and/or Korea.

Global and Comparative History M.A.: Draws on the strengths of a faculty with nearly 20 members who have made major scholarly contributions to the field.

Global Sports Business M.S.: Prepares students for sports business and administration, corporate sponsorship and branding, athletic representation, media and entertainment production, and other related careers (Fall 16).

Jewish Studies M.A.: Designed for those seeking to prepare for doctoral-level work or to further their careers in fields such as education, communal service, library science, and public affairs.

Political Science M.A./United Nations and Global Policy Studies: Designed specifically to meet the training and professional development needs of United Nations negotiators and research agencies.


Q: How has overseas study evolved over the years?
A: The traditional experience is to go for a semester or longer, typically in the junior year. We’re still committed to that model, but we’re also expanding short-term opportunities, such as faculty-led programs. Rutgers professors can bring students to a country where they have contacts and interests, share their knowledge, and provide a first-hand experience related to what they are learning about in class.

Q: What would be an example of a short-term program?
A: A new model we’re working on with faculty is an embedded program connected to a one-semester course. Going abroad at spring break or at the end of the semester is a great way to enrich a particular topic. For students who have spent time abroad or have lived abroad for weeks in another country an eye-opening experience.

There’s also our service learning program, which provides immersive opportunities focused on experiential learning and volunteerism.

Q: What countries do students choose to visit?
A: Students still predominantly go to Western Europe. But we have now developed many more opportunities in other parts of the world. We have seen an increase in students going to Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Q: What should Rutgers students know about the experience of overseas study?
A: Students must be able to fit in somewhere, but the experience is integrated into the academic structure. The departments are very open to it. We also have scholarships, and depending on where students go, the cost of living may not be high. There are ways to make it work financially. I’d also like students to realize that study abroad can be a life-changing experience—

Q: How can students get more information about Study Abroad?
A: Stop by the office (130 College Avenue, New Brunswick) or contact us (848-932-7787; RU_Abroad@gaicenters.rutgers.edu). Even if you don’t know where you want to go, we can work with you to find the type and length of program that will work best for you almost anywhere in the world.

Rutgers students travel the world.