During the summer of 2017 twenty-five students (22 BSNs and 3 ABSNs) traveled abroad. Their travel ranged from 14 days to 10 weeks (with an average of 2-3 weeks) in the following countries: Mexico, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Peru, Viet Nam, China, India, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Zimbabwe. Over winter break 20 ABSNs traveled abroad for 2-3 weeks: Costa Rica, Peru, India, Bali, Senegal, Ethiopia and S Korea. Some traveled through existing international programs. Others made arrangements independently through family and friends. Two Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCV) returned to their Peace Corps sites in Senegal and Zimbabwe. An Elon scholar who had lived in India for a year returned to that location. Other students returned ‘home’ to their countries of origin: Ethiopia and S Korea. Over the years students have traveled with the following organizations: International Service Learning, International Volunteer Head Quarters, Work the World, Atlantis Project, The UNC Malawi Project, Carolina for Kibera, A Broader View, and Gap Guru. During the summer 5 students traveled with SON faculty to Spain and 5 students traveled to China through SON contacts there. Below is a compendium of responses from current and past N489 participants to questions concerning their travel and learning experiences.

Overview of the experience and reflection on process

Travel expenses ranged from about $1200 to $5000. Students received support through scholarships & grants, gifts from family, friends & faith based organizations as well as, personal savings and school loans. In the past, scholarships have been awarded from the following sources: the Global Health Fellowship Scholarship from the UNC Global Education Center, The Aubrey Lee Brooks Scholarship, The Hogan Fellowship Scholarship which is associated with the Johnston Scholars Program, the STARR scholarship and the Class of 1938 Scholarship. A number of students received funding from the School of Nursing, as well.

Students volunteered in hospitals, community/public health clinics, home health agencies, orphanages, mal-nutrition centers and community-based organizations. Most students worked with populations that represented the life span…men, women, and children of all ages including residents of a homeless shelter.

Some students characterized their experience as a clinical experience, reflecting traditional hospital based work. Others worked with health education programs and others conducted health screenings. Occasionally, there are some settings where the experience is primarily an observational one such as past trips to China and Russia. For all students, there was an element of health systems comparison since they were able to reflect upon differences in the settings where they worked compared with the US health care system.
Students felt the most helpful resources for developing this opportunity were the N 489 information sessions, internet searches, information provided by the HSL at UNC, sponsoring organizations and personal contacts.

- I really appreciated going down with an organization that regularly sends volunteers abroad. Having access to in-country staff was especially important to me as someone traveling around by myself. I wouldn’t try to go somewhere with an organization you know nothing about-I did a lot of research about my program, A Broader View, and was impressed by testimonials of previous volunteers.

- I was encouraged and supported by both in-country staff and by Chris Harlan and the structure of the 489 course.

- I think the information sessions held with students who had previously traveled abroad were very helpful.

- I found that it was a bit stressful to organize the trip on my own. It would be nice if Chris Harlan could take a group somewhere so that people who want to travel with a group can and others can still plan their own trip if they wish.

- Google was a big help plus a LOT of previous travel experience. I knew I wanted to align myself with an organization that provides care and the money I spent to volunteer with them went directly to the organization-not a third party referral.

- Faculty in the SON such as Dr Sherwood and Chris Harlan were helpful.

- The most useful resource for me was a class mate who got the ball rolling to make the trip possible and then asked if I wanted to join him. The meetings that Chris Harlan sets up with previous students who traveled before was also very helpful.

- I feel that the resources are adequate. Using our own research to find a placement is the most effective way.

- UNC Study Abroad Office was helpful.

- I feel that students who really want to make this experience happen will find a way to make it happen. I think-that when advertising the class- it needs to be stressed that you will still be able to find a job...you just have to plan accordingly. I also think that resources for financial planning would be helpful. I struggled to get the money together.

Skills Development
Most students worked with a nurse as a mentor, but some did not. Students reported a number of skills developed or improved upon:

- Participation as a member of a health care team
- Patient communication/therapeutic relationships: patience, tolerance, appreciation
- Organization and management skills
- Taking a patient history
- Physical assessment
- Health education with teens
- Working with an interpreter
- Assisting with labor and delivery
- Assisting with suturing and wound dressing
- Giving IM and SQ injections
- Starting IVs and preparing IV medications, including chemotherapy
- Improving upon or learning a new language
- Setting up and breaking down mobile clinics quickly
- Learning about community health issues and resources

Professional Development

What aspect of the experience benefited your professional development?

- I think this experience was incredibly valuable in terms of “intangible” nursing skills. We learn a lot about cultural competency in our nursing classes but it’s not until you are on the ground in a place totally unfamiliar to you that you really start to understand how crucial it is as a nurse to be open-minded and accepting of all types of patients from all types of backgrounds.

- This course combined with my travel experience really opened my eyes to the great need that exists in the world for quality healthcare, as well as the integral role that nurses can play in meeting that need.

- The most rewarding thing about this trip was listening to parents of children with Down syndrome and their experiences. I especially liked the fact that they provided us with advice about delivering bad news to new parents.

- This experience was challenging, humbling and reflective of what I think it means to be a nurse. My time in Peru has already proved valuable to my clinicals back in the US. Now that I am home, I realize I pay a lot more attention to making sure the patient feels supported.

- The course made me more appreciative of luxuries I probably took for granted before-like running water, hot water, a car, electricity, close health care etc. I improved my Spanish skills which will be very helpful in my nursing career. I
feel that this course helped me to better understand how people can get so sick when they don’t have the money, resources or even just access to seek care. This understanding can be relevant here in the US.

- 489 was fantastic because I was able to practice so many skills. I worked in an emergency department which was a very interesting experience because we do not have that experience in school.

- Even before this trip, I was planning/wanting to pursue a career in global health. This experience allowed me to get a small taste of that type of career, what health care is like in other countries.

- Appreciation for all aspects of the US healthcare system, cultural understanding and tolerance, how to comfort someone without using language.

- I loved being able to see how a universal health care system is different from the current US care and question the policies we currently have in place.

- It was very rewarding to see how people respond with great appreciation for the medical care they receive. It was also great to see how medical care can be a great gateway into hearing about people’s spiritual needs and caring for those as well.

- The experience substantially influenced my professional growth in many ways. I learned the art of non-verbal communication, a skill that I will use every day during my nursing practice. I also learned a great deal about treating patients holistically vs pharmacologically. I will integrate this knowledge into my nursing practice and will treat patients as a whole instead of just treating the problem they present with.

- The entire experience was challenging and really pushed me to grow as a person. Speaking, doing and thinking everything in a language that is not your own is very taxing. Also, taking on a number of responsibilities within a medical setting in a different language, with little supervision led me to be very resourceful and confident in my skills. I am much more comfortable taking vitals manually, and much more confident performing in a clinical setting here in the US. If I could perform well in a Spanish-speaking country with few resources, I should be able to do at least as well here!

- I believe that the outstanding characteristics were being able to use my nursing skills in a foreign country, trusting my ability to communicate in a second language, and forging new relationships with patients through body language instead of relying completely upon spoken word communication.

- I was able to work on clinical skills and assessment through taking vitals, medication administration and starting IVs. I worked alongside a team of two
doctors, a nurse and a pharmacist so I had the opportunity to work and participate as a member of the health care team. I was able to form relationships and increase my ability to communicate with patients despite there being a language barrier.

- I think their openness and acceptance of me as part of the team instead of ‘just a student’ really aided my professional growth. I really had the opportunity to become part of the team and feel as though my role was needed/important.

- My time in the NICU was incredible. Working with babies and their families was truly a life changing experience for me.

- I think the experience definitely made me more humble. I was able to see how care is provided in a far-away region of the world and how they make things work with minimal resources. It made me value the resources we are allotted as nurses here in the US.

Additional US based work

A few students in the 2015 cohort worked in the US in addition to going abroad. But over the years the majority of students have not done so. Those who have chosen to work in the US state that the 2 experiences complemented each other and provided an excellent opportunity to compare health systems.

- My time abroad showed me that I needed to continue to practice communication and time-management skills; my time working as a CNA has certainly challenged me to further develop and practice time-management skills as well as priority setting.

- I definitely feel much calmer in clinical situations. I feel I can read people well and work to make patients feel as comfortable as possible when we work together.

- Since returning to work in a hospital here, I have had 2 Spanish speaking patients and even the little bit that I know makes them feel more comfortable. I’ve been complimented on speaking Spanish by both patients and their families.

Course Evaluation

- The textbook is wonderful. It includes stories from global health nurses of all different personal and professional backgrounds. This would be a book to read on your own time and not just for school! Assignments were appropriate and the forum posts allowed me to contextualize and reflect on my reactions and
experiences. They also made realize that I was not alone in my experiences-global health nursing can be challenging at times but I can’t think of a more rewarding experience.

- The course was wonderful! The readings were interesting and relevant. I didn’t feel like I was reading for a class.

- I loved reading the textbook! It’s a book I would have enjoyed reading just for fun outside of class too. I think the workload was fair.

- Everything went smoothly. I just wish I had read through all the forum topics before I left so I could have been thinking about them from the start.

- The course design is well suited to the content.

- Overall the course was a great experience that I would not trade for the world.

- I really enjoyed the way the course was structured. Sort of annoying to find Internet in a country where it isn’t readily available, but I understand the reasoning for the forum posts that were due ‘in-country”. It took a few days to find Internet but it was doable.

- I absolutely loved the textbook readings (and so did many other students from around the world in my organizations that asked to read it after I told them a couple of stories from it!). It really is sooo great!

- I, honestly, felt the course was very well structured. I appreciated the meetings at the beginning of the summer to clarify compliance. They I really liked the freedom we had to get our assignments in as we went through our experience. I also appreciated that we were in forum groups that were traveling at the same time so we could see what other classmates were doing/experiencing in different parts of the world.

- I actually enjoyed the way the course was set up. The required assignments were feasible and enjoyable.

Other Comments

- The course was definitely an eye-opening and worthwhile opportunity!

- Great experience! I think spending time in another country, whether a short trip or long trip, does so much to influence our perspective and outlook on healthcare
in the US and throughout the world. I am more grateful for the resources and education we have here and see how little we really have to complain about. It’s harder to not think about or not care about the crises in other parts of the world when you’ve seen the faces and places for yourself.

- The trip gave me greater respect for nurses who live and work in other countries, usually with fewer supplies and resources (and for longer hours) than in the US.

- I would definitely recommend this course to others! Such a great experience and opportunity!

- Important to emphasize that you can go abroad and get a job too. I think a lot more people would be interested in participating in N 489 if they knew that.

- I recommend that students choosing N489 go through an established organization. I think it is a lot harder and stressful to plan a trip all by yourself. Having an organization get the logistics in order makes the whole experience a lot more enjoyable and you have the opportunity to travel with students from other universities.

- HIGHLY recommend going with one friend or an organization that will place you in living situations with other healthcare volunteers.

- Thank you for all your support during our travels. It was so wonderful to be able to chat with others traveling at the same time and to see how our experiences differed from one another and yet to see the similarities even though we were in different clinical settings and in very diverse cultures. This class was definitely a highlight of the nursing program!

- I had a great time on this trip. It went smoothly and I feel like I learned a lot about myself as a person and it gave me a lot of confidence in nursing. It was the first time I have traveled alone and I can’t wait to travel again next summer. Thanks for helping set up this program.

- I would like to thank the SON for having this program.

- My travels to Peru opened my eyes to many things, not just in reference to health care, but to a different culture, differently lifestyle. I cannot wait until my next trip. I realize there is so much to see and so much to learn outside of the US.

- Overall, it was a very rewarding and unique experience that I don’t think I could have gotten if not for this course. I will hold on to my memories and experiences from Thailand forever. Thanks!
I am very thankful for the opportunity to travel and study abroad this summer. The flexibility of this course was amazing and it allowed me to do exactly what I wanted to.