

Human Ecology students work independently to help solve local challenges.

Undergraduate Internships Unite College Initiatives



A new summer internship program recruits undergraduate students to apply the findings of Human Ecology research to communities in New York—ultimately bringing together the college’s education, research, and outreach initiatives.

Last summer, two students participated in the program—a partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension. Julie Lundgren worked with Kosali Simon, assistant professor of policy analysis and management, on her efforts to explain the Medicare prescription drug benefit to area senior citizens. And Alissa Ritter worked with Christine Olson, professor of nutritional sciences, and Nancy Wells, associate professor of design and environmental analysis, on environmental factors that lead to obesity, particularly in pregnant women.

Unlike many other summer jobs, the program is set up to give students the opportunity to work independently to address a challenge facing central New York communities.

“The program was really a way to give students a chance to dive in and make a difference,” said Josephine Swanson, assistant dean and associate director of Cornell Cooperative Extension. “It’s a fantastic way to use our research to help local communities and educate our students at the same time.”

This summer, the college has plans to expand the program to include six interns in total, including positions to help with obesity in low-income children and to connect disadvantaged youth with nature. >>>

Helping seniors navigate Medicare Part D

Lundgren started her internship with a lofty task—trying to help seniors better understand the prescription drug benefit that's part of the federal Medicare program. The plan, which offers prescription drug coverage to millions of seniors who were previously not covered, involves dozens of New York-specific choices and complex benefits that start and stop at various times through the year.

Lundgren's main responsibilities included connecting with county offices interested in expanding their Medicare Part D education programs, and then creating brochures based to help educate seniors about the benefit.

"She served as our eyes and ears in the community, and really got a sense of what the counties needed," said Robert Harris, a registered pharmacist and project manager for the CURxED Medicare Part D enrollment project. "That allowed us to fill in those gaps."

Lundgren said the experience provided opportunities she's never had before—to work independently on a major social issue and have a chance to make a real difference in the lives of people.

"By raising awareness about Medicare Part D's complexities, we hoped to help seniors get the most out of the benefit and optimize its efficiency in the community," she said. "The idea was that by giving them a sense of the larger picture, they would make more educated choices."

There was one other lesson she learned over the summer—one that will stick with her for a lifetime. "I learned to start saving for retirement as soon as possible," she said.

Highlighting exercise opportunities

Alissa Ritter's charge for the summer was also an ambitious one: finding ways to encourage exercise in Chenango County, a rural community about 50 miles east of Ithaca. Her work was part of an initiative called Environmental Strategies to Reduce Obesity—an effort to examine ways to use local settings to encourage healthy lifestyles.

Working under the direction of Olsen and Wells, Ritter first took an inventory of the physical activity opportunities in Chenango County, then created a brochure with a map that encouraged local residents to take advantage of them.

In addition, she conducted a survey of 300 Chenango County residents to find out if they could name three places to be physically active. She found only two-thirds could name three places, and many participants named activities that would not classify as exercise within their rural communities.

"Their concept of physical activity was fairly skewed," she said. "There really weren't gyms, and a lot of people just didn't know where to go to exercise."

Keith Severson, executive director of Chenango County Cooperative Extension, also worked closely with Ritter to help make contacts in the community.

"We looked at her just as we would a regular employee," he said. "We spent some time introducing her to our network in the area, and then we just let her go. It was much different than our normal internships because she was responsible for a body of work that had a specific important influence."

For Ritter, the chance to build relationships in a community and help them to solve a serious problem was rewarding. "It's the most freedom I've ever had in an internship, and I really felt like I was making a difference." ● ● ●

For more information:

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Expanding outreach

Human Ecology and Cornell Cooperative Extension will sponsor six interns for the summer of 2008. The internships, followed by the cooperating faculty members, are:

Internship in Breast Cancer and Environmental Risk Factors: Working on an intervention project to prevent weight gain in adult working women. (Carol Devine, associate professor, Nutritional Sciences)

Internship in Urban Forest Adventures: Connecting disadvantaged youth with nature. (Nancy Wells, associate professor, Design and Environmental Analysis)

Internship in Fiber Science and Apparel Design: Helping assess the impact of textiles and apparels—from design to production, distribution, and end-of-life—on the environment. (Charlotte Coffman, senior extension associate, Fiber Science & Apparel Design)

Internship in Nutritional Sciences: Improving the health of low-income children by focusing on parenting, physical activity, and food choice. (Jamie Dollahite, associate professor, Nutritional Sciences, and Katherine Dickinson, research associate, Nutritional Sciences)

Internship in Family Life Development: Designing and evaluating interventions for new parents to promote maternal well-being, effective care-giving, and healthy child development. (John Eckenrode, professor, Human Development, and Charles Izzo, research associate, Family Life Development Center)

Internship in Youth Mentoring: Linking youth with adult mentors in rural communities. (Stephen F. Hamilton, professor, Human Development, and Mary Agnes Hamilton, senior research associate, Human Development)