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Extension student interns connect Cornell to communities

By Sarah Perdue

From studying climate change and ways to prevent obesity in a community to jazzing up unflattering used clothing into new outfits for teens, 13 Cornell students served as Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) interns this past summer, working with faculty on community outreach projects they helped to design in their fields of interest.

"Climate change is a very important issue, and I was able to both learn more about it and help raise awareness," said Jase Bernhardt '11 at a CCE Summer Internship Program reception Oct. 15 in Mann Library, where the students talked about their projects and hosted a poster session.

An atmospheric sciences major, Bernhardt spent eight weeks in Dutchess County collecting climate data and attending seminars and meetings on climate change. He then wrote the climate section for the county’s Natural Resources Inventory, a document that was last updated in 1985.
Nicole Castelli ’10 helped teenagers in Chemung County transform clothing from goodwill into hip new outfits.

As a nutritional sciences major, Laura Sugarwala ’09 wants to focus her career on community nutrition. “I applied to the summer position because I wanted to learn more about the process of creating and evaluating an intervention,” she said. She traveled to several New York counties to monitor the activity levels of participants who wore pedometers for 10 weeks as part of a project to raise awareness about the role of exercise and diet in preventing weight gain and, ultimately, lowering the risk for breast cancer. She identified factors that helped people maintain a healthy lifestyle, such as walking in a group or eating with people who were eating healthy foods, and compiled data and helped determine what worked well in the program and what didn't.

Like most research, the students’ projects did not always go according to plan. Rosie Taam ’11 said that she worked with Urban Forest Adventures, a program that encourages children to explore the outdoors for two hours each week while teaching them wilderness survival skills. She noted that participant retention in this yearlong program was worse than they had expected. Not deterred, she learned that "building relationships is a big part of extension" and worked on fostering connections with the community as an unexpected but worthwhile part of her internship.

Other projects included taking surveys of consumers and growers to assess the impact of Farmers’ Markets in the North Country; monitoring the success of a Chemung County child abuse prevention and neglect program; and running a workshop that took teens to Goodwill to pick out an unflattering article of clothing and, à la Project Runway, recycle and redesign it into a hip new piece the teens would wear.

For information about the internships for next summer, contact Connie Kan at ck236@cornell.edu.

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