

Summer Spotlight

UCLA Blum Center Summer Scholars

August 10, 2017

About the Program

The UCLA Blum Center Summer Scholars Program is a unique opportunity for graduate students to work with Latin American universities, international institutions, governments, and community organizations that are improving the health and social conditions of low-income and vulnerable populations. UCLA faculty members and representatives from host organizations in Latin America provide mentorship for participating students.

Since our 2013 inaugural year, the UCLA Blum Center has placed 23 students in research positions throughout Los Angeles and Latin America. Summer Scholars represent a range of graduate programs including: Public Health, Political Science, Latin American Studies, Social Welfare, and Urban and Regional Planning.

Scarlet Peralta Tapia

Campus: UC Irvine

Mentors: Dr. David Heres and Dr. Hernan Bejarano

Site: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), Mexico City, Mexico

Research topic: Exploring the role of trust, information and institutional reputation on consumption of public drinking water in Mexico City



Visiting the ruins at Teotihuacan

- ❖ What made you decide to apply to be a Summer Scholar?

Coming across the UCLA Blum Center Summer Scholar program was the opportunity I have always dreamed of having. To be able to go back to my



Scarlet drinking from a "bebedero" (public drinking fountain)

motherland to conduct research and use to my skills to contribute towards increasing the health and well-being of those living in marginalized areas is what motivated me to apply. The Summer Scholars program has provided me

with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to conduct meaningful work and make a positive impact in Latin America.

- ❖ What is your current research project and what attracted you to that research?

My current research project explores the role of trust, information and institutional reputation on consumption of public drinking water in Mexico City. The problem of water usage in Mexico City is very complex and most of its inhabitants believe that tap water is unsafe to drink. In this study, we are focusing on understanding if the lack of information regarding water quality and government reputation are the main drivers of the low levels of consumption of public drinking water.

This study takes advantage of a recently implemented program, "bebederos" (drinking fountains) in parks; and will use an experimental approach to assess the effectiveness of these programs. The program is run by Mexico City's Public Water Agency (SACMEX); thus, the program provides us with the optimal setting to understand how trust, reputation and socio-demographic conditions influence subject's consumption of water at the "bebederos". Our study proposes to conduct a naturally occurring field experiment, to see if providing informational campaigns at the "bebederos", regarding the quality of water



Scarlet visiting el Museo Nacional de Antropología (National Museum of Anthropology)

being provided, will increase the consumption of water. The result of these informational treatments will allow us to respond to the following question: How does information regarding the quality of public water affects its consumption?

❖ What have you gained from being a Summer Scholar?

Being a Summer Scholar, I have gained life experience. I have learned how to organize my life, condense it into one suitcase, handle unforeseen situations, and be independent. I gained the opportunity to not only gain a deep understanding of

the social issues people in Mexico face but I also gained the opportunity to observe local traditions, learn about the local way of life, upskill in local language and become a part of new and beautiful community.

❖ What has been your best experience while abroad?

Going to foreign places, trying new food and seeing breathtaking sights is undoubtedly one of the best experiences I have had. I gained the opportunity to spend an extended period immersed in incredible new foods, customs, traditions and social atmospheres which have provided me with a better understanding and appreciation for my culture.

❖ Do you have any advice for future Summer Scholars?

My advice for future Summer Scholars is to learn a little bit about your new country before you get there and to make a valid attempt to learn the language. Don't be afraid to make new friends and explore new places!

❖ What is a fun fact about you most people do not know?

I'm a cinephile; a devoted moviegoer. I love films and cinema, especially foreign films from the mid 1900s. My favorite films in that category are *Breathless* and *La Dolce Vita*.



Scarlet's work area

Maria Allan Bala

Campus: UC Davis

Mentor: Dr. Andres Herrera

Site: FNE International, León, Nicaragua

Research topic: Prevalence and risk factors of gastrointestinal diseases in children in Nicaragua

- ❖ What made you decide to apply to be a Summer Scholar?

What drew me in was the opportunity to learn from another culture and to apply what I've learned in the classroom to real life. I study Global Disease Biology at UC Davis, which emphasizes the concept of One Health. This multidisciplinary field provides a



Maria, after sand-boarding down a volcano

more holistic approach to global health by recognizing the connection between environmental, animal, and human health, and more recently, cultural and sociopolitical factors, as well. Being physically present in these countries that I read about in class in case studies brings a new level of understanding to these concepts. For example, during my time in Nicaragua, I've

made my way through microbiology laboratories, the university research office, and the rural towns surrounding León like Chacraseca, where there is only one clinic run by one doctor and a few nurses serving 8,000 people. In order, I've learned their lab's protocol for determining pathogenic DNA in fecal matter for diarrheal infections, which is a common cause of infant mortality in Nicaragua; spoken to scholars and other locals about their thoughts on the country's current economic and political state and how that's affecting the health system; and met with people from the lowest end of

the social scale to see the impact of a country ravaged by almost a century of endless war that's made them vulnerable to easily preventable and curable diseases. From huge political affairs that cross international borders down to the microscopic pathogens that have the power to sculpt economies, you can only really understand how they all connect from living here.

- ❖ What is your current research project and what attracted you to that research?

I am currently doing research on the prevalence and risk factors of gastrointestinal diseases in children in Nicaragua (which is why I was looking at fecal matter in the microbiology lab) and determining the social drivers behind it. This stems from my interest in infectious diseases and how changes in the environment because of human activity drive global disease patterns.

- ❖ What have you gained from being a Summer Scholar?



Center of León where the spirit of the revolution is still very palpable; murals of revolutionaries cover the walls of the city

After studying Spanish for about a year previously, I've gained comfortable fluency in the language through constant practice and immersion here in Nicaragua (and in

Colombia the previous summer). I hope I can use this to communicate with more people and connect with them on a more personal level.

- ❖ What has been your best experience while abroad?

Seeing the view from the top of a 3,000-foot volcano.

- ❖ Do you have any advice for future Summer Scholars?

Read up on the country before you go to gain at least a basic understanding of the culture and society, and if you can, any material from that country related to your field. This will help you hit the ground running when you arrive and allow you to ask the right questions. And before you fly, leave any preconceived notions behind. It's best to start fresh.

- ❖ What is a fun fact about you most people do not know?

I've climbed and sand-boarded down an active volcano.



House in La Calle Real, another rural area in Nicaragua; Scoping out the area where FNE International will build more stable homes made of bricks and concrete



The local health post in rural Chacraseca



Microbiology lab at Centro Medico in León



The view from the top of Cerro Negro volcano