

Student finds academic adventure in Mongolia

Part of a series profiling undergraduate researchers provided by University of Pittsburgh Office of the Provost.

By Niki Kapsambelis

When Amanda Gregg first departed to conduct an independent research project in Mongolia, she had a lot of unanswered questions: How big would the language barrier be? Would she find anyone willing to help her with the research? How would she get from place to place?

Fortunately, her sense of adventure, the guiding hand of her advisers and her considerable intellectual reserve helped her to not only conquer the project, but flourish in a country completely different from everything she had ever known.

"I really came home with a much better understanding of what my project was about," says Gregg, a senior who plans to pursue a fifth year of study so she can earn a Bachelor of Philosophy (BPhil) degree through the Honors College.

Gregg is something of a Renaissance woman: In addition to a joint degree in math and economics, she also is earning a degree in history, a minor in physics and a certificate in Russian/East European studies. A native of O'Hara Township in suburban Pittsburgh, she applied to the University on a whim and interviewed for a Chancellor's Scholarship.

"They really convinced me that I could pursue my interests with a free hand here, that I would be taken care of, and that college would be a blast," she says. "If you come here, you can do whatever you want, in whatever depth you want. And nobody will tell you it's a bad idea."

Birth of an idea

Gregg was no stranger to overseas travel when she first conceived of the trip to Mongolia. In the summer of 2006, she studied abroad in Moscow. So with the summer of 2007 approaching, knowing that the Honors College has a field studies program in Mongolia, she decided to try a new location — with a new focus.

"It was kind of convenient for me that the Honors College had this program, and that they knew I had an interest in that part of the world and that experience," says Gregg. "It really fit together for me to go."

At the time, she was taking a course titled "Post-Socialist Economies in Transition" from Daniel Berkowitz, a professor of economics. Impressed by the papers Gregg wrote for his class, Berkowitz suggested that she adapt a well-known survey done in Eastern Europe in the late 1990s that asked businesses how they used their court system in resolving disputes.

So Gregg agreed, and with little more than an idea and chutzpah, flew to Mongolia.



"I had no idea if this was going to work," she says. "I had basically 50 copies of this thing."

When she arrived, Gregg immediately began making connections in the Mongolian business community. The Honors College got her started by introducing her to people affiliated with the North America-Mongolian Business Council and arranging for an adviser from the National University of Mongolia.

"Off I went," says Gregg, who immediately fell in love with the spontaneity of the country. "It was a blast! I couldn't believe that an economics project could be so heavily about talking to people."

Finding her way

She managed to collect 30 surveys, exceeding her expectations. Although she hired a handful of translators, she found that most Mongolians younger than 40 spoke English very well, especially those who are successful business directors.

A bigger adjustment for the normally punctual Gregg, who believes in planning ahead, was the fact that Mongolians prefer to work in a state of flux. That meant setting appointments and finding a translator in advance were far more difficult than in the United States.

"In Mongolia, planning ahead is not something you do. Nobody wants to talk to you about a week from now," says Gregg. "That was my major culture shock. I kept asking people if they wanted to make an appointment for me next week, and they said they didn't know what they were doing."

After a week and a half, her best translator quit, adding almost as an afterthought: "Oh, by the way, I'm going to Hungary next week." But Gregg soon found a replacement.

Daily tasks also took some getting used to, says Gregg. Back home in Pittsburgh, she uses a bus for transportation, after first carefully checking the schedule, and arrives five minutes early for appointments. "But in Mongolia, that's a little bit rude. You have to loosen up immediately or feel out of place," says Gregg, who in Mongolia traveled mostly by taxi, none of which are labeled. People simply stand on the side of the road and

Undergraduate Amanda Gregg and her economics professor Daniel Berkowitz seem pleased with her research on Mongolian conflict resolution.

hold their arms out, and when a car stops, they direct the driver where to take them and decide on the fare when they arrive.

"I can't believe I did this," she laughs. "It was one of those things where when I joked with my parents about it, they were not pleased. But a lot of things just took getting over."

Distilling results

The project also taught her what she hoped to learn about the Mongolian court system as it applies to businesses. Although people seemed generally happy with the system, few used it to resolve disputes.

Instead, merchants in the close-knit society prefer to deal with those problems in person.

"Everybody knows everybody there. There's a tight social network, so there's a lot of incentive for people to behave, I guess," says Gregg. If a business fails to pay a supplier, "They might know somebody who knows your mother-in-law, and they'll make some phone calls and you'll get yelled at. It was hilarious. Almost every business I talked to had a story like that."

When she returned to the United States, Gregg wrote a research paper that was nearly 40 pages long. She plans to present her findings in the spring of 2008 at a conference of the American Center for Mongolian Studies, and plans to publish something in the Pitt Political Review.

After completing her undergraduate work, Gregg plans to study economics in graduate school, although she is not yet sure what career she will pursue. Currently she is working as a research assistant for Berkowitz, who is effusive about her potential.

"She's definitely in the top echelon," he says. "She's got a lot of interests: economics, math, history, politics. She's about the broadest student I've dealt with."

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