

New Zealand creates rich research backdrop for undergrad

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

By Niki Kapsambelis

Growing up in the planned community of Columbia, Maryland, Anna Siegel spent a lot of time thinking about the ideals of social, cultural, and economic integration around which its policies were based.

But it wasn't until she traveled to New Zealand for a Brackenridge Fellowship project that she was able to explore those issues in the scholarly setting of a major research university.

Thoughtful, articulate, and not given to accepting pat answers, Siegel — who is entering her junior year at Pitt as a joint major in politics and philosophy with a second major in anthropology — is the type of undergraduate who is both eager and academically ready to pursue research in another country.

As part of the fellowship, Siegel was required to produce a research project. She was also planning to study abroad in several countries — Brazil, South Africa, and New Zealand — in the spring semester of 2008, and she wanted to create a project that would incorporate elements from both philosophy and anthropology, two very different disciplines.

"This project has sort of been one that I've been thinking about a lot in terms of different ways to meld those two fields," she says. Additionally, "I was always sort of attuned to dynamics of diversity, and the strengths and weaknesses that a policy of integration had."

New Zealand turned out to be a good backdrop against which Siegel could conduct her research, "An Anthropological and Philosophical Look at New Zealand Multi-Culturalism," because the country is largely English-speaking and small enough to be navigable.

She was able to examine the relationship between white settler populations and the indigenous Maori population in English, which her adviser, anthropology Professor Richard Scaglione, says is ideal from the anthropologist's perspective because the researcher is able to pick up on nuances that could be lost through an interpreter.

"You have this situation in New Zealand, although it's not without problems, where you have two very different ethnic groups living together in relative harmony when you look at the worldwide scene," he notes. "The jumping-off point is that they must be doing something right in New Zealand. What is it, and how can we apply those les-

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— **Professor Richard Scaglione**

sons to other social situations? Those are some of the issues she's grappling with."

Despite some of the advantages New Zealand presented logistically, Siegel did still encounter some road bumps in the 5 ½ weeks she spent in the country. For example, a lot of Maori history is still oral, so when she interviewed different members of a community, "a detail would be off — different numbers, different dates," explains Siegel.

Additionally, the format of conversation is different among the Maori: "There's more of an interest in telling stories in order to re-create historical events," she says. "I sat down to interview the leader of this big Maori protest movement. I was all prepared with my questions, ready to ask him about the procedural elements of the recompensation process and the legal process of retaining rights, and he began telling me about his family and how they had come to the land."

That, according to Scaglione, is one of the valuable takeaways of the research: the ability to step outside one's comfort zone.

"One of the jobs of anthropology is to help people step outside their culture," he says.

Siegel acknowledges that she was discouraged at first, but then quickly began to alter her focus and realize that the stories were integral to the culture she was trying to understand.

"It really taught me that I needed to not go in with such clearly defined aims, and let my interviewees define where the conversation went," she says.

Having completed the fellowship, Siegel now plans to continue her research as part of an honors thesis. A personal trip to Israel over the summer has sharpened her interest in conducting research abroad again.

"Being there while immersed in my research project opened up my eyes to all of these really cool cultural experiments that are going on in Israel, and how my research could maybe fit in," she says.



Undergraduate researcher Anna Siegel stands with her mentor, cultural anthropologist Dr. Richard Scaglione.

Scaglione, who continues to advise Siegel, is pleased with her intellectual curiosity and her ability to handle constructive criticism.

"This is what academia is made of, really: being precise about what you're saying

and having the wherewithal to back up what you're saying," he says. "She's willing to challenge, but she's also willing to have her mind changed. I think that's fundamentally what we're trying to teach students at the University."

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