Letter of Welcome

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LETTER OF WELCOME

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As Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs at the University of Northern Iowa and co-founder of the UNI Global Health Corps, it is a great pleasure for me to take this opportunity to both reflect back on the founding of our organization here at the University of Northern Iowa and to look toward the future, as the Global Health Corps continues to grow and have an important impact, not only on UNI students and faculty, but also as a model for developing globally oriented programs in higher education everywhere.

Like most good ideas, I suspect, the UNI Global Health Corps was first conceived in conversation—conversation, which took place at a most ideal time and in a most ideal location. This particular dialogue took place in my living room on a summer afternoon in 1995, just as I was preparing to leave to participate in the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. As a member of a university search committee, I was interviewing that afternoon a candidate for a new faculty position in health education. That candidate was a newly graduated Doctor of Public Health from the University of California at Los Angeles. Her name was Michele Yehieli.

As Dr. Yehieli and I shared our mutual international interests in that conversation, she began to share with me what she thought the possibilities might be for providing a more global experience for our health education students. Like several of my colleagues in the Health Education division at UNI, I had been participating in a number of international projects in recent years. We had all come to realize that we had a great need for a vehicle that would help us to better prepare our UNI students to work successfully in more diverse environments, both in Iowa and abroad. We hoped with this new position, that we could establish a stronger international health presence in our division and in our curriculum. Needless to say, we were successful in convincing Dr. Yehieli to move from Los Angeles, California to Cedar Falls, Iowa; and the rest, as they say, is history.

In that first conversation with Dr. Yehieli; and in many other seminal discussions with Drs. Dennis Cryer, Tom Davis and Sue Joslyn, senior faculty in the Health Division; a vision began to emerge, not only for a more internationalized health education curriculum for our students, but also for a student/faculty organization, the Global Health Corps, which would provide an opportunity for students and faculty to work together in communities both in Iowa and around the world to translate theory and skills (learned in the classroom) to practice (in the public health field), while at the same time providing needed culturally-appropriate public health programs to under-served groups.

With a few tiny mini-grants and experiential learning awards from various sources within the College of Education and the university and with the solid encouragement and support of our colleagues and our department head; we began to cultivate our fledgling organization; developing working relationships within the university and with various governmental and non-governmental groups and conducting needs assessments to determine
future projects. By the 1996-97 academic year we were ready to launch our official “Global Health Corps Pilot Project” with experimental coursework in international health building on an already strong foundation curriculum; with our first Iowa mission to conduct a community health assessment in rural Mills County, Iowa; and with our first international mission to Haiti, where we would spend two weeks working with the Friends of the Children of Haiti to provide basic health services and education to desperately poor rural Haitian citizens. We concluded that first official year up to our elbows in glue, with a small grant from the Iowa Arts Council, that allowed us to bring the Euelienspiegel Puppet Theater to UNI to join with Global Health Corps students in constructing a family of delightful and intercultural puppets, who have been assisting us with community health education programs ever since. It was a remarkable year, to say the least.

Most important, perhaps, in that inaugural year, we saw the emergence of strong and competent student-leaders for the Global Health Corps. These talented individuals were our first project leaders, research associates and program representatives; and they helped us to understand the breadth and depth of the capabilities of our students. Because of them, the Global Health Corps is an organization with a genuine partnership between students and faculty with a primary mission that is firmly both student- and service-centered. These UNI graduates, like the Global Health Corps student-leaders who are following them, are going to make a real difference in the world, just as they made an unforgettable difference for us. We will always own them a great debt of gratitude.

Since that first year, as many readers will know, the Global Health Corps has grown to match and even exceed our vision. We have clearly defined a unique four-level model of education for cultural competency, which first exposes students to cross-cultural experiences in the curriculum and ultimately involves them in short and long-term international health missions and internships in both developed and developing countries. Each week Global Health Corps students and faculty are studying international and public health issues in their classes, while at the same time they are volunteering to provide health education programs for Bosnian refugee families in Waterloo, IA, for Latina mothers at the local YWCA, for African-Americans at risk for hypertension, and for homeless men at the Salvation Army – to name a few. Global Health Corps students and faculty have also conducted international health missions in such locations as Haiti, Cuba, Israel, Mexico, Ghana, St. Lucia and China and, increasingly, our students are choosing to spend their final semester abroad, participating in an international internship working with a local non-government organization to serve the under-served. The Global Health Corps brings its services to where the clients are; even if that is a shantytown, a back alley or a village street corner.

Of course, such dramatic growth cannot be attributed only to creativity and enthusiasm. Thanks to the dedicated advocacy of Dr. Patricia Geadelmann, UNI’s Director of External Relations; the Global Health Corps has been the recipient of significant federal funding to support our work. Dr. Geadelmann believed in this project from its infancy and knew that, with the right circumstances and with a strategic and sustained effort, support would be forthcoming. She should also be counted among our founders. Federal funding has allowed us to grow, admitting more students and establishing more projects, at a much faster rate that we could have done with only internal resources. Perhaps more
important, external funding has allowed us to establish the Global Health Corps as a model for education for cultural competency and public health education that can be emulated by other institutions.

I am certain that all those included in the UNI Global Health Corps family look ahead in this Millennial year 2000 with great anticipation. Undoubtedly, with a firm foundation now established we will continue to expand existing GHC programs and develop new projects. With the anticipated continuation and maturation of the Global Health Corps, I would now challenge our organization in two additional areas. First, I believe we now need to add to our efforts the establishment of a rigorous recruitment and scholarship program for students from various under-represented groups. In the same way that preventive health services and education are denied most to underserved populations throughout the world, the opportunity to obtain a university education and participate in our Global Health Corps is also denied to many young people due to their financial circumstances. Our program and the field of public health in general would be enriched with more diversity in our graduates and I hope that in the coming years we can find ways to bring more students from varying socio-economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds into our program. Second, as we graduate increasing numbers of culturally competent and internationally experienced health educators, I believe Global Health Corps program leaders must forge solid and deliberate partnerships with national and international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) INTERACTION (the American Council for Voluntary International Action), the Peace Corps, and other international organizations which can become the future employers of our graduates. We own it to our students to provide those opportunities and such organizations will be better for employing these talented and experienced graduates of our program.

With this inaugural issue of the International Journal of the Global Health Corps, I invite our readers all over the world to journey with us into the vibrant lives of our university Global Health Corps students as they grow in both professional competency and cultural sensitivity; into the communities of our clients both in Iowa and abroad as we engage with them in achieving the highest standard of health possible; and into the culture of our university here in the heartland of Iowa, where the ideas and the ideals of the Global Health Corps were first planted and now continue to grow and blossom. Pack your bags and join us for the journey, for the best is yet to come!

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