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THE GLOBAL HEALTH CORPS: BRINGING THE POWER OF PREVENTION TO THE PEOPLE

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The United Nations has stated that health is a fundamental right of every human being. However, in the midst of unsurpassed technological and other global advances at the dawn of the new millennium, millions of people around the world in developing countries still live in staggering poverty and die every day from highly preventable diseases and malnutrition. Even in richer countries like the United States, many minorities, immigrants, refugees, rural farm families, the indigent and other at-risk populations have very poor access to health care due to a variety of financial, geographic, and socioeconomic barriers. In America alone, for instance, more than 44 million people are uninsured and do not receive regular medical treatment. They have even less access to culturally-appropriate preventive services such as health education programs that could help provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to improve their own wellbeing. At the same time, the world is rapidly becoming more diverse with increased globalization and migration. Within the United States, for example, minorities currently comprise approximately 20% of the population; however, by the year 2050, this figure will rise to 50%. Economic disparity in this country is also increasing, with the United States now having the largest income gap between the rich and poor of almost any industrialized country.

However, many health education, pre-medicine, and related university students, particularly in rural states, are poorly prepared to work within these changing demographics. Within the United States, their studies have traditionally focused on the generic needs of the white, middle-class majority, and largely ignored the more challenging health issues facing underserved and diverse subpopulations. In order to address this need, the University of Northern Iowa developed the "Global Health Corps" program in 1996. The purpose of the program is to improve the cultural competency of health education and related pre-professionals through a service-learning model, while simultaneously increasing access to preventive health services for diverse and underserved populations. Students in health education, nursing, pre-medicine, and related areas may earn a 16-hour certificate in cross-cultural preventive health programming for underserved populations. The program combines academic coursework on the special needs of at-risk communities with extensive field immersion training on-site in impoverished neighborhoods, shantytowns, ghettos, and villages around the world. The students design and deliver preventive community health programs to real patients on a variety of topics, ranging from malaria and tuberculosis, to cancer and diabetes. Locally in Black Hawk County, Iowa, and surrounding states, the Global Health Corps regularly works with

inner-city African Americans, Bosnian refugees, Hispanic migrants, the homeless, house-bound elderly, rural farm families, Appalachian school children, Hmong refugees, and many other at-risk populations. Around the world, the Global Health Corps has also conducted health education and medical missions to impoverished slums and remote settlements in Ghana, Bangladesh, India, Mexico, St. Lucia, Cuba, Venezuela, Haiti, and Estonia. Permanent projects have been established in West Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean, where student pairs rotate every semester to provide on-going community health services to at-risk populations. In addition to providing direct health education, primary health care, and community research services to underserved populations in the field, Global Health Corps students also gain practical experience learning how to operate this non-profit, humanitarian organization on an administrative level.

The Global Health Corps is now recognized as a model program for improving the cultural competency of health related pre-professionals, and recently received \$1,000,000 of federal funding through the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration for its operations. It is also the winner of the 1999 Governor's Award for Excellence in Diversity Programming from the state of Iowa, and the Human Rights Award for Black Hawk County, Iowa. Amazingly, in just a few years time, the Global Health Corps has already trained nearly 200 students and served more than 10,000 at-risk clients around the world. Through their efforts, students have helped meet the preventive health needs of people who normally would have no access to such programs, while simultaneously improving their own pre-professional skills so that they are better able to work in the reality of the global village of the 21st century.

As Co-Founder and Director, I invite you now to share in our latest venture, "The International Journal of the Global Health Corps". This biannual academic publication will provide an outlet for professionals to share their latest research, theories, and practical programming strategies that address the multidisciplinary public health needs of diverse and underserved populations. It is yet another way that the Global Health Corps is helping to prepare a new generation of health professionals to lead the struggle for sustainable development, social justice, and human rights through the promotion of health for all, especially for those most in need.