Responses to Drug-Related and HIV problems in Latin American Countries

The Latin American, Caribbean and Iberian Studies (LACIS) Department afforded me the opportunity to intern at Intercambios, a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Buenos Aires that studies and calls attention to problems related to drug use and HIV/AIDS. The organization has been in existence since 1995 and is a founding member of the Latin American Harm Reduction Network and the Argentine Harm Reduction Network. Consequently, Intercambios is a leader in the field of human rights and harm reduction approaches to drug use and HIV/AIDS in Latin America.

A harm reduction philosophy towards the use of drugs focuses on reducing the potential dangers of using drugs and defending the human rights that are often times violated as a result of stigmatization or discrimination against drug users. This philosophy greatly contrasts one that is based on prevention because harm reduction accepts the idea that drug use takes place and looks to reduce the risks associated with its use. Conversely, a preventive approach focuses on education intended to prevent drug use from happening in the first place. Prevention based programs are more conservative in nature and are employed throughout almost all of Latin America in large part because of strong ties to religion.

With these central philosophical differences in mind, Intercambios assigned me to a research team responsible for compiling information in two main areas: 1) government sponsored policies and programs throughout Latin America that deal with drug use and HIV/AIDS, 2) non-government sponsored programs and their philosophies towards dealing with the aforementioned issues. Upon completing an analysis of each Latin American countries response (or lack thereof) to drug use and HIV/AIDS related problems, the “Global State of Harm Reduction 2008” report was submitted to the International Harm Reduction Association and then eventually to the United Nations.

The Experience

As a result of interning at Intercambios, I learned a great deal about the current state of drug related HIV epidemics in Latin America and the need for more comprehensive, government sponsored approaches to tackling the problem; approaches that not only include prevention but harm reduction as well, and within systems that promote communication between government sponsored agencies and NGO’s.

Additionally, my contribution as a researcher gave me a better understanding of the daily operations within a NGO, and how often times they are forced to rely on volunteers because of small budgets. While I value my experience with Intercambios, I realize that I strive in settings where direct contact and communication with other people is necessary. This understanding and realization will definitely help me as I begin narrowing down precisely what career field to enter and what type of work environment to pursue.

Preparation and the Future

My four years at UW prepared me in ways that go beyond numbers or academic knowledge. It is true that my studies in Latin American Studies and Spanish eased the transition for me upon working at
Intercambios. I was already familiar with Latin American history, politics, and healthcare after having studied in Buenos Aires previously and having studied Latin America during my four years at the UW-Madison. Additionally, I felt confident in my research skills and ability to work well with other peers; attributes that I developed during my time at UW. From a broader standpoint, interaction with professors and students in the LACIS and Spanish Departments helped me grow as a person. I learned to seize opportunities and pursue my goals, which is part of the reason why I continued living in Argentina for a year upon the completion of my internship. I am confident that my experiences in Madison and Buenos Aires have helped me hone skills that have and will continue to prepare me for my future.

I would like to thank the LACIS Department for awarding me the grant. The financial and moral support helped me return to Argentina in order to study a topic that I am passionate about and also to continue polishing my Spanish language skills. I highly recommend that other LACIS students take advantage of such a unique opportunity and apply for the grant. It is an opportunity to see other parts of the world and learn not just about an academic field but about oneself as well.