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'I'm a Different Person Now'

Honors College Students Explore Health and Energy Issues in Ghana



Published Friday, January 31, 2025 4 min read

By **Ed Brennen**

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Senior environmental science major Cate Kleeman meets children at St. John Anglican Primary School during the recent honors study abroad trip to Ghana.



Image by Jesse Heines

Walking from ward to ward in a municipal hospital in Winneba, a coastal town in southern Ghana, senior [public health](#) major Ziona Bodden noted the lack of medical equipment and listened as nurses described pooling their money to buy prescription medications for their patients.

"Think about the impact that's having on health care workers," says Bodden, whose concentration is in community health and health promotion. "A portion of their income is basically funding health care."

Bodden was among seven [Honors College](#) students who traveled to Ghana during winter break for a weeklong [study abroad](#) seminar, "Global Energy and Public Health in the Developing World."

Honors students Clea Cloutier, left, and Grace Bolutife Oladoja listen to a doctor talk about health care services at Winneba University Hospital in Ghana.



Image by Jesse Heines

"It reignited my passion for creating health equity around the world," says Bodden, who is "excited to get in the industry and make a change" after earning a [Master of Public Health](#) degree.

SPOTLIGHT

Honors Study Abroad

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Led by Professor Emeritus of Physics [Robert Giles](#), the three-credit seminar included tours of clean water plants, power companies and health facilities, meetings with local government officials and lectures at the University of Education, Winneba, a UMass Lowell (UML) [partner institution](#).

When students returned home, they presented research proposals on ways to drive positive economic change in the West African nation, where almost a quarter of its 30 million people live in poverty.

"What really struck me was, even with such extreme poverty levels, they are such joyous people. Their culture is so cohesive, and they are so welcoming and hospitable," says Cate Kleeman, a senior [environmental science](#) major and [field hockey player](#) from Gibbsboro, New Jersey.

Students at St. John Anglican Primary School greet Professor Emeritus of Physics Robert Giles with a bouquet of flowers.

Kleeman, who examined access to energy, learned that power outages are so frequent in Ghana that they have their own word in the Akan language — "dumsor," which the students experienced one night at their university dorm. She says she returned home with a stronger resolve to take on climate change and, like all of her classmates, a greater awareness of over-consumption in America.



Image by Jesse Heines

For sophomore public health major Grace Bolutife Oladoja, the trip was a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" to compare Ghana to neighboring Nigeria, where her parents are from and where she has visited family.

"I saw that Ghana has better resources and is a safer country," says Bolutife Oladoja, who researched water quality and food security.

For nearly a decade, Giles took interdisciplinary teams of students to Haiti, where he founded the Haiti Development Studies Center to conduct research projects on energy, water and food safety. Because of social unrest and the pandemic, Giles stopped the trips in 2020 (though he still teaches online courses in Haiti).

During a gala at "Lowell Vila," the home of alum Gordon Halm '12, '13, the visiting UML contingent dances to the music of the Windy Voices choir.



Image by Jesse Heines

"I started going to Haiti in 2003 and it really changed my life, so I desperately wanted to share it with my students. They really embrace what's going on," says Giles, who turned his attention to Ghana at the suggestion of UML alum Gordon Halm '12, '13, founder and executive director of the African Community Center of Lowell.

A native Ghanaian, Halm hosted the UML contingent for a community gala, complete with musical performances and dancing, at his home in Winneba, which he dubbed the "Lowell Villa."

"Study abroad experiences like this take students out of their comfort zones and allow them to identify potential contributions that they can make with their education," says Honors College Dean [Jenifer Whitten-Woodring](#), who accompanied the students along with Professor Emeritus of Computer Science [Jesse Heines](#).

The honors contingent included, from left, Kira Etienne, Cate Kleeman, Ziona Bodden, Michael Kubit, Grace Bolutife Oladoja, Elliot Johnson and Clea Cloutier.



Image by Jesse Heines

Michael Kubit, a senior [political science](#) major from Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, wanted to visit Ghana because he sees its economic development playing a growing role in global politics.

"Right now, there's a brewing storm between U.S. interests and Chinese interests, and how West Africa develops is going to be a big part of the future in terms of foreign diplomacy," he says.

Kira Etienne, a senior [education](#) major who lives in Norwood, Massachusetts, was surprised to learn that many children as young as 12 are pulled out of school to work in the fishing industry. She hopes to design a curriculum specifically for Ghanaian children and return to the country, perhaps on a future trip with Giles, to introduce it to schools.

Wearing a dashiki he bought in Ghana, senior applied biomedical sciences major Elliot Johnson gives his final presentation at Olney Science Center.

As an aspiring humanitarian aid professional, senior [applied biomedical sciences](#) major Elliot Johnson appreciated the opportunity to meet with community leaders.

"It's important to be culturally sensitive," says Johnson, a native of Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, who researched sanitation and disease in coastal Ghana.

Clea Cloutier, who completed a bachelor's degree in [psychology](#) in December and is now pursuing a master's degree in [peace and conflict studies](#), examined Ghanaians' attitudes toward ethical and sustainable development.

"I grew up with a very sheltered perspective, so I wanted to experience something new to get a better understanding of the world," the Milford, New Hampshire, native says. "I feel like I'm a different person now."

Image by Ed Brennan

