Understanding global health issues requires students to go beyond their textbooks, to travel and connect with peoples and their cultures, and gain firsthand experiences that go deep into the matter and its underlying nuances. Striving to become versed in their public health careers, five Utah State University (USU) Online students in the Health Education and Promotion Master of Public Health (HEP MPH) program went on a study abroad trip to Chang Mai, Thailand from May 4-20. They set out to research health topics specific to Thailand, such as hygiene and communicable diseases, tropical disease management, and suicide and mental health issues.

To prepare for the two-week research trip to Thailand, students met with Steve Hawks, a USU Moab professor integral to the Master of Public Health programs at USU, every other week for four months to review the Thai language, culture, and proper manners. They also picked health-related topics to research. After their preparation course was completed, they set out for Thailand led by Hawks.

"The online program fit my unpredictable on-call work schedule, and the Thailand trip allowed me to meet other online students in person was really fun and helpful."

"For me personally, the chance to be with our MPH students in the field, in a global setting, is the highlight of the program," said Hawks. "Each day brought new insights as we worked with orphans, visited public health and healthcare partners, and explored Thai culture."

Throughout their time in Chang Mai, the students spent their mornings at a local orphanage to perform service and discover what was being done to help the children develop healthily. In the afternoons, they visited different healthcare and public health agencies, presenting and discussing topics they had prepared with local staff and management.

According to Hawks, the five USU Online students conducted themselves professionally and had a positive influence on the local people. "These students helped us make new contacts and connections that will allow us to engage with vulnerable populations as we grow and develop the study abroad program."

Pong Sewart Niwomca, a retired Chang Mai University professor, facilitated the day-to-day translation. Professor Niwomca put the student group in touch with nonprofit organizations and humanitarian groups focused on promoting health education. They visited the Chang Mai International Rotary’s Mae Tao Clinic, dedicated to providing child protection and education to Rohingya refugees.

"I don’t think you can get a true idea of global health until you travel outside the United States," said Kirt Jensen, an HEP MPH USU Online student. "My only regret is that we couldn’t stay longer and do more to help those wonderful people. Given the chance, I would go back and try to organize a project to help the hill country people develop their clean water supplies and teach sanitation concepts. You can’t get this kind of life-changing experience by sitting in a classroom or online."

This was the HEP MPH programs first study abroad trip, which launched fall 2018. The program is available 100% online, and this trip option allowed the students to work with each other in person. They were able to apply what they learned from their online discussions and assignments in a real-world setting.

"The study abroad option in USU Online’s MPH program was really a draw for me to choose USU," said Sara
Margetts, an HEP MPH USU Online student. “The online program fit my unpredictable on-call work schedule, and the Thailand trip allowed me to meet other online students in person was really fun and helpful. This study abroad brought me closer to reaching my career goal to work in global maternal and child health.”

USU Online degrees and courses facilitate meaningful life experiences for students and faculty no matter where they live. They have the same resources and opportunities, like study abroad, as students who attend on campus.

To learn more about the HEP MPH online program, visit online.usu.edu/hep-m.

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