Medicine & Society

The Medicine & Society Program is an exciting opportunity for undergraduate students in Arts & Sciences who are interested in exploring the interface of culture, behavior and health from a social science perspective. The program addresses the important social and cultural foundations of health and illness in human societies, with a specific emphasis on service and research opportunities. The program is supported by a grant from the Danforth Foundation and administered through the Department of Anthropology.

Eligibility

The Medicine & Society Program is a four-year program designed for matriculating first-year students. Upon acceptance to Washington University in the spring, students may apply online for admission to the program by indicating their interest in Medicine & Society. A description of the program and how to apply online is in Getting Started, a brochure sent to students in mid-May.

Admission to this program is highly competitive. Academic credentials, aptitude and interest in a health-related career, and personal statements all will be considered when selecting up to 20 participants to join the entering cohort. The program will particularly appeal to students with a long-term commitment to careers in the health professions and related areas.

Curriculum

The Medicine & Society Program has its intellectual and programmatic roots in the field of medical anthropology, which is broadly defined as the study of human health and illness across culture, time and space. Medical anthropologists examine the role of culture and society in the shaping of illness experiences. Foci of inquiry may include such issues as traditional health beliefs and practices; cultural clashes between traditional medicine and biomedicine; political and economic foundations of health disparities; alternative and complementary medicine; social and behavioral factors that affect disease rates; and public health responses to emerging health problems. These topics all share a focus on community as a primary area of inquiry and population as a primary unit of analysis.

Requirements

Once admitted to the program, students must complete the following:

- First-year Medicine & Society seminar
- Community health internship or service-learning activity
- A major or minor in anthropology or the global health and environment track of anthropology
- A junior/senior seminar addressing contemporary issues in Medicine & Society
- Senior capstone or honors thesis

Students who are accepted into the Medicine & Society Program are enrolled in a year-long first-year seminar on culture, health and society in the Department of Anthropology. This seminar provides the academic foundation for future community health work in St. Louis. Beginning as early as the sophomore year, students identify and select a community health site for internship placement or service-learning activities. The internship/service-learning opportunity provides students with a location for focusing their interest and involvement in community health and allows them to participate in the work of the host organization. During the junior and senior years, students have the opportunity to intensify their academic and service activities at the internship or service-learning site, which may culminate in a senior honors thesis or a capstone project based on original research and investigation. Students in the Medicine & Society Program are encouraged to graduate with honors, based on their independent research and academic achievement.

This course of study provides an excellent foundation for future graduate work in medicine, public health or any of the allied health professions, such as nursing or physical and occupational therapy. Students who complete the program will also be highly competitive for admission to other professional schools, such as law, business or social work.

Personnel

The Medicine & Society Program is directed by Dr. Anna Jacobsen, a sociocultural anthropologist who works on issues pertaining to religion and morality as they influence perspectives and understandings of personhood and health. Previous research has focused on these processes as they have unfolded in Somali refugee communities in Kenya and Northern Europe. Dr. Jacobsen’s work has expanded to include the ways vaccine confidence has been informed by moral and religious ideologies in Somali communities around North America and how understandings of death and dying have been broadly influenced by the same. Students also have full access to other faculty in anthropology and related disciplines who offer courses of relevance and interest.

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