Master of Public Health Program celebrates its inaugural cohort's graduation

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Cornell saw a new addition to its commencement weekend activities with the graduation of the inaugural cohort of the Master of Public Health (M.P.H.) Program. Eleven students from five countries received their hoods in a ceremony marking the occasion at the College of Veterinary Medicine May 25.

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Housed in the Graduate School and administered through the college, the M.P.H. program launched in fall 2017. "Public health is taught in disciplines throughout Cornell's campus, but we never offered professional public health

training that tied it together before this program," said Dr. Alexander Travis, program director and associate dean for international programs and public health.

The program is among the first of its kind to be formed under new public health competency guidelines, and incorporates two fields of study for students to choose from: infectious disease epidemiology or food systems and health. Underpinning the whole program are the core concepts of sustainability, equity and engagement.

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"These two concentration areas are signature strengths of Cornell," said Travis. "What really sets our program apart are our involvement of small teams of students in real life problems with partners outside of academia, and our consideration of the massive environmental challenges facing our planet today. These affect every dimension of our lives, especially our health and wellbeing. If we don't start to make sustainability a core part of public health, future generations will suffer for it. We have to think about sustainability as an equity issue across generations."

Several students earned awards, which were presented to them during the hooding ceremony:

Valedictorian

- Hirokazu Togo, M.P.H. '19

Excellence in Public Health Impact

- Infectious Disease Epidemiology: Lakshman Balaji, M.P.H. '19
- Food Systems and Health: Qijin Wang, M.P.H. '19

Excellence in Public Health Leadership

- Caitlin Baumhart, M.P.H. '19
- Ana Barsallo Cochez, M.P.H. '19

Individual Best Exemplifying Sustainability, Equity and Engagement (peer-selected)

- Andreina Thielen Martin, M.P.H. '19

The graduating M.P.H. cohort has already made an impact in New York with projects that approach public health issues like food accessibility and vector-borne disease in Tompkins County.

Some of the graduates plan to stay in the Ithaca area to either pursue additional degrees or work in the community with organizations like Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE). Others will venture across the United States, like Steven Shelley, M.P.H. '19, who will work with the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention as an epidemiologist, and Darryl Ware, M.P.H. '19, who will start a fellowship with Kaiser Permanente in California. Others will return to their home countries to put their knowledge into practice, like cohort valedictorian Togo. Originally from Japan, Togo will return to his job as a senior environmental health officer in Japan's prefectural government.

Making their mark in New York

The graduating M.P.H. cohort has already made an impact in New York with projects that approach public health issues like food accessibility and vector-borne disease in Tompkins County. Each student has partnered with organizations like CCE, Healthy Food for All, the Cayuga Center for Healthy Living and various school districts. For example, Togo and Martin partnered with the Ithaca City School District to find ways to mitigate barriers that prevent students from participating in free breakfast programs.

"We are training the next generation of public health leaders," said Travis, who is committed to keeping the cohort sizes small so that the program can continue its engaged approach working with community partners. Next steps for the program include pursuit of formal accreditation from the Council on Education for Public Health.

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"Although our Master of Public Health program is brand new, Cornell has played a leading role in advancing public health since its own founding," said Warnick. "Today, though, we focus on your role as pioneers: you, the founding class, and this milestone of your graduation."

In addition to the M.P.H. graduates, the college also celebrated the commencement of 96 veterinary students. Five students earned their Ph.D. in the graduate field of biomedical and biological sciences, which includes some who will remain to finish a combined D.V.M. degree or work in a postdoctoral position. More graduates are on the horizon, with four students who will complete the Master in Professional Studies – Veterinary Parasitology program by the end of summer 2019.

By Melanie Greaver Cordova

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