Fairfield University in Connecticut is recognized for its Cuidemos Nuestra Salud (Take Care of Our Health) Project for nursing students in Nicaragua; the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is recognized for the MIT International Science and Technology Initiatives (MISTI) program that sends students to more than 20 countries for science and technology internships each year; and Northwestern University in Illinois is recognized for its global health studies program developed in part by Northwestern’s Office of International Program Development.
NURSING STUDENTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN A NICARAGUAN BARRIO

It took some families in a barrio of Managua, Nicaragua, by surprise when U.S. and Nicaraguan college students showed up at their door asking what they knew about HIV/AIDS prevention. But soon the students were familiar faces. The nursing students from Fairfield University in Connecticut and the social work and Teaching English as a Second Language students from Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) were part of a project called Cuidemos Nuestra Salud (Take Care of Our Health). The project began in 2009 and now continues every year to improve the health of preschool children and their families in the impoverished Barrio Ayapal.

Vilma Alvarez, UCA professor of social work, had connected with community leaders the year before when she sent her students to the barrio to perform service. At the time, UCA and Fairfield, both Jesuit institutions, were no strangers to one another. Fairfield faculty had research ties there that stretched back to the 1990s, and the university began sending Latin American and Caribbean studies students on short trips in 2000. In 2004, the universities signed a collaborative agreement that established a semester-long study abroad program at UCA and also provided a full scholarship for a UCA student to attend the sister school in Connecticut each semester.

IN FOR THE LONG Haul
Lydia and Philip Greiner, nursing professors and spouses, decided the sister school partnership presented a perfect opportunity to enrich the learning experience for undergraduates in her public health class, students who usually do prevention work in low-income neighborhoods in Bridgeport, a few miles from the Fairfield campus. Now some would spend spring break in 2009 learning about and addressing the challenges and needs in Ayapal.

The Greiners had laid the groundwork in an earlier visit where they met Alvarez and Marisol Morales Vega, the community leader and director of a preschool, Amigos por Siempre, for the barrio’s three-to-five-year-old children. Morales “was really clear. She said, ‘You’re not just coming once. That’s been done before. People have come, they promise, and they leave. I’m not interested in that.’ We made a commitment that we were in for the long haul,” Lydia said.

LISTENING FIRST
They also committed to listening to the community first before deciding what to do. A dozen Fairfield nursing students were paired with UCA social work

Nursing professor Lydia Greiner get the partnership in a Nicaraguan barrio started.
The university students teach Amigos por Siempre preschoolers to wash their hands thoroughly to stop the spread of diseases.

students and a student who could translate, and they went door-to-door asking families about their most pressing health concerns. Later Morales called a meeting with parents active in the preschool to discuss the results. The answer was clear: HIV/AIDS education was what people wanted most.

“They felt people were very stigmatized and there was a lot of misinformation. They asked us to produce a homegrown DVD that people could watch in the privacy of their homes because Martsol said they would not come to an event about HIV/AIDS,” said Greiner. The Fairfield contingent returned home but continued to collaborate with the UCA students by e-mail and Facebook. They also enlisted help from other Fairfield students with video-making skills. They produced a four-minute video with images from Nicaragua and a draft script that was translated into Spanish and vetted by Morales and some of her school parents. A UCA student at Fairfield narrated the final version.

Lydia Greiner returned in 2010 with a dozen more students and, with the same UCA students, distributed 400 copies of the DVD to families throughout the barrio. Subsequently Fairfield has sent students and faculty to Nicaragua twice a year, fulfilling their public health nursing requirements while working on priorities such as cardiovascular health problems and promoting hygiene in a barrio that floods easily and does not always have running tap water.

FINDING THE LINK BETWEEN THE BARRIO AND BRIDGEPORT
Greiner and other faculty take both traditional college-age nursing students and older adult students who are switching careers. Greiner said she has seen some students who had a passing interest in public health nursing “become passionate about it,” including Colleen Grady, now an emergency room nurse in Boulder, Colorado, who went on that first trip in 2009.

“My Spanish skills were terrible. It was such a blessing to have the UCA students there to help translate,”
said Grady. “One thing that I will always remember is when one of the UCA students told me how sad she was to see how people in the barrio were living. She lived nearby, but was unaware of the hardships in the barrio. It made me think about how easily we can become disconnected to people in our own cities and neighborhoods.”

“After this trip I knew that I wanted to volunteer as a nurse internationally, but I also felt the importance of taking care of people in my own community,” said the 31-year-old Grady, who has subsequently volunteered with a nonprofit called Blanca’s House in El Salvador and Liberia.

Professor Jessica Planas, who has made three of the trips, said she impresses upon her students the similarity of challenges facing the poor whether in Managua or Bridgeport. “Many of the families that we work with in Ayapal deal with the same issues that my patients back home deal with,” including lack of money to buy medicine and low literacy levels, she said. “And these issues will be encountered by all my students, regardless where they choose to practice nursing.”

INTERNATIONALIZING THE UCA STUDENTS’ EDUCATION

Speaking through an Interpreter, Professor Alvarez said, “What we have in common is the community work.” While the Fairfield contingent comes for just a week, the work “is continuous,” with her students and the community leaders continuing to promote preventive health measures year-round. The added value for her students “is the intercultural experience and the interdisciplinary approach.”

UCA psychology student Maria Christina Aguirre, who spent the fall 2012 semester at Fairfield, said working in Ayapal “was a beautiful experience. The people were very thankful.”

UCA has 8,000 students, most on government-funded scholarships to the Catholic Institution. Laurie Cordua,
UCA’s director of academic cooperation and internationalization, said, “Having this relationship with Fairfield is very important for us. Our students don’t have the means to have a study abroad experience. This gives them the opportunity of having an inter-cultural experience, of sharing, of working in teams with students from the United States that otherwise they wouldn’t have. It’s really an internationalization experience at home, locally.”

**MIRRINGTON THE UNIVERSITY MISSION**

Sixty percent of Fairfield’s 5,000 students study abroad for a semester, year, or shorter periods, or perform service in five countries. The university’s strategic plan speaks about producing young men and women “committed to diversity and the promotion of justice” and “prepared to engage with the world around them as competent and informed global citizens.”

President Jeffrey von Arx, S.J., said, “It is no longer sufficient to measure globalization by the numbers of students getting on a plane.” The partnership with UCA and Ayapel crosses “language and cultural divides to effect real and lasting change,” he said, and stands as “an exemplar of how the university lives out its mission.”

Fairfield, which enrolls students from other U.S. universities in its semester-long program at UCA, has also invited nursing faculty and students from other schools to join the work in Ayapel, and it is planning to send its own nurse practitioner graduate students to work in a rural health clinic in January 2014 in Santa Maura, Nicaragua, a mountain region where coffee is grown. January is the harvesting season when the clinic nurse has her hands full treating an influx of 3,000 migrant workers.

So the partnership is growing despite challenges that include the paucity of bilingual nursing students and faculty at Fairfield’s end as well as the time constraints of academic requirements in both institutions. Despite these impediments, both sides regard their collaboration as a model for community-based work. Neither has the complete answer, but by working together they are making a difference in people’s health in barrio Ayapel.

**TOP TO BOTTOM:**

The social work and nursing students performing a skit at the Barrio Ayapel preschool.

Fairfield and UCA students perform a skit for preschoolers about brushing their teeth.

The entire team of UCA and Fairfield students in the barrio preschool where they taught good health habits.