Editor’s Note: Jennifer Hagemann has been instrumental in setting up a global health student interest group on her campus and has volunteered to chair a newly formed GHSIG networking subcommittee for GHSIG student members interested in global health. Contact Jennifer or check the GHSIG webpage for more information if you are a student and interested in networking with other students.

I write this from the seat of an airplane as I watch Nicaragua fade into the distance beneath the clouds. I spent the previous week with eleven of my PT classmates and two faculty members teaching a course on clinical gait analysis to physiotherapists in Nicaragua. This trip is offered each year by the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus PT program to a small number of third year PT students. This trip combined with a passion for global health and travel served as the impetus during my first year to join efforts with Kristen Vaughan, PT, DPT, then a second year student, to start what would become the PT Global Health Club. Kristen and I met at a global health symposium where we were unsatisfied with the limited physical therapy related information. We started collecting resources and information specific to PT in global health in order to get involved in global health as students and, in the future, as clinicians. Although we did not set out to start a club, as we spoke with classmates and faculty it was apparent that many others were interested. Within six months we had a group of 8-15 students meeting monthly to discuss global health and prepare for the Nicaragua trip.

We adopted a “pay it forward” philosophy to set a precedent and create a foundation of resources that would benefit the current classes and could be passed to future classes. We established a list of standing priorities which included finding foreign language opportunities, increasing awareness of global health and PT, getting involved in local service activities including those related to Native American communities, fundraising, establishing global health related electives and curriculum, and networking. These priorities led us to acquire the Rosetta Stone program for the PT program, create a list of organizations that support PTs abroad, acquire funding to start a medical Spanish language elective designed specifically for PTs, and raise funds to defray Nicaragua trip costs. We also provided an avenue for students to get involved in service activities by identifying local and international organizations in need of volunteers.

When we started the PT Global Health Club, our campus had a Students for Global Health group (SGH) which had little PT involvement. We believed it was important to integrate into the larger medical campus community and increased PT presence at SGH steering committee meetings, seminars, and events. In conjunction with SGH, we collected money, toiletries and basic first aid items for Project C.U.R.E Kits for Kids in developing nations. Partnering with SGH opened more doors for collaboration and broadened our opportunities.

Each member played an active role toward meeting our goals by assuming specific roles and responsibilities. Given our relatively short time on campus, this was crucial for success. Another crucial component was the support from our faculty and our Office of Diversity. Our faculty provided needed guidance and support, and through the Office of Diversity, we applied for and were awarded scholarships and funding to help get our projects and ideas off the ground.

My time in the PT Global Health Club is coming to a close as I look forward to graduation in May 2012. Our third year class has passed leadership to our second year colleagues and we are excited to see the fresh new ideas coming out of the club. The time and effort we invested in getting this group up and running was well worth it and provided us with opportunities to be involved as students as well as valuable information, skills and resources we will need as we step into the world of international health care as practicing PTs.