From our Spring/Summer 2012 Newsletter: 2012 Honors Graduates Speak

Maggie Ward
"You're too progressive NOT to be in sociology. You need to switch majors." Professor Juanita Diaz said to me as we paid for our dinner at a nearby Panera.

Within hours, literally, right after the dinner, I was passing out petitions protesting cuts to public higher education. I quickly realized that it was this level of education, of connection, of challenge I had been seeking from college. I was never short of a challenge. I'll never forget, one day after class, then graduate student Matt Birkhold threw up his arms and said to me, "at one point, you're gonna have to do more than get signatures on a petition!" Taken aback by his booming voice, I was stunned. "You gotta always think ahead--what's your next step?"

The next step for me, in class and outside of class, was challenging myself. I broke the typical relationship prototypes of professor—student, teacher’s assistant—undergrad. I sought out the brightest, and forced myself to start thinking, talking, even acting like them. The open doors in the Library Tower made this process easy and fun.

By the time senior year snuck up, my professors had passed along to me some really awesome opportunities. I switched places with them, if just for a moment, when I presented to an audience of graduate students and professors, at the sociology graduate student’s World Historical Social Science Conference.

Most notably, I had the opportunity to work with Professor Kelvin Santiago-Valles on what would be a 60 page honors thesis titled “The Struggle for North Africa's Future: ‘Youth’ Action Amidst Neoliberal Development.” His hours of time, along with the efforts of Professor Deyo and Professor Martin, helped me engage in a level of analysis the department prides itself on. It was this research that helped me, right after graduation, secure work for a nonprofit organization.

Emily Patka
Writing my thesis on “Finding New Words for Old Struggles: The Emergence of the Zapatista Movement” was definitely a learning experience. I started out feeling very confident that I would have no problem figuring out what I wanted to write about and how I wanted to organize it. As I started to get into the process, I realized how big of a project it was, and the infinite number of things I could focus on, even within one subject area.

Halfway through the fall semester I radically changed what I wanted to write about; I decided to work on the Zapatistas, whom I have been interested in for a long time and from whom I learned a lot when I went on a study abroad to Chiapas in June of 2011. I focused on their development starting with a precursor organization that was formed in the 1960s up to their 1994 uprising when they became public, as that is not often discussed. I learned a lot about the history of the Zapatistas while writing this thesis, but I learned even more about the process of independent research, and how challenging it is to give yourself the structure and discipline necessary to create a coherent and engaging final product. I am happy with the final result, and am grateful for all the faculty support I had while working on this project, mostly my advisor, Professor Deyo, and my secondary reader, Professor West.

Alyssa Starrantino
My experience writing my Sociology honors thesis on “An Alternative to Foster Care?: Residential Education and Student Outcomes” was one of the best opportunities I took advantage of during my education at Binghamton University. My study allowed me a significant amount of creative direction, which was a dream come true. My committee, especially my advisors Professor Frederic Deyo and Professor Gladys Jimenez-Munoz, were extremely supportive and aided me in overcoming the challenge of learning how a social sciences thesis should be constructed. The experience helped me improve my research skills, writing ability, and communication skills- the last by interviewing professors around the country, and even Skyping the founder of the United States’ residential education program across the world! Writing my thesis has opened more doors for me, including aiding in preparation for a graduate-level education in the fall and creating further opportunities to engage in my thesis research.