

Perfect Time for a Course on Pandemics

This summer’s course, *Pandemics That Shaped the World*—taught in Florence during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—enabled students to develop their own playbook for a public health response.

BY LINDSEY VLASIC, BA '22

Before COVID-19 made the term “pandemic” a daily presence in conversations and world news, it was already part of life for Christopher Woolverton, PhD.

A founding member of the College of Public Health in 2009, Woolverton has been at Kent State since 1995. A professor of epidemiology, he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses. He also conducts research on the detection and control of bacterial pathogens, and biological safety and security issues. Since 2016, Woolverton has traveled to Florence, Italy, to teach a special topics course, *Pandemics That Shaped the World*, which he developed for the Kent State University Florence Health Institute. The institute allows students pursuing a career in public health, nursing or related fields to study the impacts of their field through an international lens.

For the summer 2022 course, Woolverton made some timely additions to the course content, including historical and current data on COVID-19 and monkeypox. “The course is designed to teach students about pandemics, so we start with the bubonic plague—and we’ve added in COVID-19 because it’s in real time,” he says. “We also talk about the great influenza pandemic of 1918 and monkeypox, which is in the news right now. To be able to tell the students historically what happened and then bring them to the present day has allowed me to share not only my passions in the fields of infectious disease and public health, but also to help students really see that public health is bigger than just the local health department.”

However, his students in Florence aren’t the only ones learning as they study abroad. Being in Florence has provided Woolverton with opportunities to speak with experts on COVID-19 vaccine development and the city’s history of public health crises, and to dive deeper into his research and gain a greater understanding of his own course materials.

“It’s an amazing opportunity not only to study the history, but also to see things evolving currently in

the pandemic we’re experiencing,” says Woolverton, who has been an important health advisor in shaping COVID-19 safety measures for Kent State University and the city of Kent. “To be able to share with students why Italy is so important in the history of the bubonic plague and to the ongoing history of COVID-19 is quite fortuitous.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered many aspects of society, including the way Woolverton teaches *Pandemics That Shaped the World*. He created an assignment for students to develop a playbook for how they would respond to a pandemic. In class, they go through a zombie pandemic scenario with typical response tactics implemented by public health professionals during a pandemic. This helps them determine what they would do differently and repackage the information for their own playbook. At the end of the semester, they share their ideas with Woolverton and their peers.

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“Part of the responses students have made to the pandemic have been local,” Woolverton says. “They ask why people aren’t wearing masks and why we had to when other countries didn’t. We talk about how sometimes science has to be looked at through political eyes so that it can be palatable to most of the people who have to implement it. It’s an opportunity for students to go beyond just books and paper.”

Woolverton’s students have experienced the pandemic in two countries, with two different approaches to handling the crisis. It’s made them question policies from both countries and gain new perspectives on how to confront a public health crisis like COVID-19.



Above: Christopher Woolverton, PhD, (front row, right) and the 25 students (3 graduate and 22 undergraduate) in the *Pandemics That Shaped the World* course gather outside Siena’s cathedral (Duomo di Siena).

“Studying abroad allows students to reframe questions they would ask back in the States because they’re seeing things from a different economic and political point of view,” he says. “They are able to form their own opinions because they have firsthand data that’s not filtered through others’ eyes.”

The study abroad course was built around the idea of classroom activity, didactic interaction between students and professors, and excursions throughout Italy, including a lecture at the VisMederi Vaccine Institute in Siena and a tour of Siena’s cathedral.

One of Italy’s finest Gothic churches, the cathedral was begun in its present form in 1229 and the city of Siena planned and began work on a gigantic expansion in the early 1300s. However, the Black Plague swept through the city in 1348, leaving

two-thirds of the population dead. With them died the plans for the expanded cathedral.

Woolverton intends the excursions to show students how public health has influenced art, history and architecture and expand their understanding of course material from the classroom.

“Study abroad experiences do more than just open students’ eyes to what’s going on in the world,” Woolverton says. “They gain a level of maturity by being able to see the world differently. Study abroad is one of those critical pieces of education that allows a person to be a better student, citizen and employee when they go off to their career.” ⚡

Learn more about the College of Public Health at www.kent.edu/publichealth and the Florence Health Institute at www.kent.edu/globaleducation/florencehealth.



Left: Kent State University public health students visit Careggi University Hospital canteen, in Florence, to learn how food safety is practiced in Italy.