After receiving a Fulbright Scholarship and a National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Award last spring, Ph.D. student Michelle Grocke settled in to her research field sites in Nepal. There, she will spend a year examining the impact of new road construction on the agriculture, nutrition, and overall well-being of the people who reside in the remote Humla District located high in the Himalayan Mountains. By measuring these impacts, she hopes to quantify how local populations respond both culturally and biologically to new road development.
What first attracted you to this sort of work?

Being able to study the impacts of the first road ever to be built in an area of the world is a once in a lifetime opportunity. People that have for centuries engaged in a barter system way of life are now experiencing the first wave of a market economy. Properly understanding how this economic transition is impacting health is very important. I also believe that it is important to understand the variability of health outcomes within the population.

Are you seeing any trends or evidence in this regard in either of your research sites?

The new road provides easy access to a market in China. Villagers reported abandoning their agricultural fields of nutrient-dense crops like amaranth and buckwheat because the imported white flour was both easy to obtain and holds a much higher prestige value than locally grown grain. Market-purchased foodstuffs are now considered status symbols within the community.

Is it difficult being so isolated that far away from home?

The Humli people of Nepal are some of the friendliest people I have ever met in my life. You can’t walk an hour in Humla without someone asking you where you are going, where you are from, if you have eaten yet, or whether or not you would like some tea. People that have only met me one time very briefly would go to the greatest lengths to help me out. I have never felt alone here. I believe that the reason for this is the generosity and innate compassion that all Humli people I have met seem to possess.

What was it like to learn you were the recipient of two prestigious academic awards in less than a year?

Receiving these two grants in one year was overwhelming for sure! I worked very hard during the first three years of my doctoral program, but hadn’t seen many tangible results. Receiving these grants made it apparent that someone aside from my advisor, dissertation committee and immediate family found value in my research. It didn’t come easy. I think the lesson I learned is to not take a rejection personally. You just have to keep creating ideas, revising and reapplying. Eventually something positive will come of it.

If you could give advice to incoming freshmen, what would it be?

Don’t narrow down your focus until you have taken many different types of classes from different departments. You’re still young and have PLENTY of time to decide a major. Explore as many different areas of study as you can...It might surprise you where your interests lie. And don’t forget to explore all of the beauty in and around Missoula, it’s a wonderful place!

Want to know more about Michelle’s research?  

For up-to-date information on Michelle’s experiences in Nepal, visit her blog at http://mgrockehumlanepal.tumblr.com/ or the H&S website at hs.umt.edu