

Individual Study and PICA Capstone Project: Reproductive Rights for Adolescent Mothers with Developmental Delays

“When I came to Connecticut College, I had two important but diverse interests: special education and urban maternal healthcare. At the time, I took it for granted that my two passions had very little in common, except that they provided ample opportunities for service learning. I enrolled in the PICA program specifically because of the opportunities for community involvement. When the time came to articulate my specific PICA interest, I chose to focus on prenatal care for low-income women, and planned my long-term academic program accordingly.

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of my American Studies major, I was able to take classes to meet the PICA requirements in a wide range of departments, including Human Development (HMD). After completing three or four HMD classes in sequence, it only seemed natural to declare a minor in the department. The complement of my American studies and human development work had a crucial effect on my PICA journey. I began to see that women do not give birth in a vacuum; their preparation and experiences are significantly effected by their own, and the nation’s, cultural and social past. To put my academic studies in action, I worked as a social work intern on Boston Medical Center’s Maternity Ward. The majority of the mothers I worked with were adolescent girls. Many already had, or were considering, dropping out of school. Some expressed concerns that they weren’t as ready as they would like to be to raise a child. I realized that my interests in special education and maternal healthcare were not separate entities at all but actually strongly intertwined issues.

All that I saw and learned during my summer at the hospital influenced my final decision to write an independent study paper with Professor Akai of the human development department. I went into the project planning on examining the birth defects of infants born to developmentally delayed mothers. As I conducted more and more research, I realized how much adolescent mothers and developmentally delayed mothers had in common, and how significantly they were negatively affected by circumstances and systems beyond their control. Suddenly I understood that my interest all along had been in reproductive human rights for all people, including individuals with special needs and marginalized groups such as low-income women. My final paper morphed into a blueprint for fulfilling reproductive rights, which includes specific in-school programs designed to empower developmentally delayed and adolescent mothers.”