Although this service trip was only one month long, it completely changed my view of the world. It not only intensified my desire to continue community service at home and abroad, but also gave me a more realistic perspective of challenges in a developing country. Different legs of the service trip revolved around increasing nutritional education in a rural community and school, funded by the NGO Food for Life Vrindavan (FFLV) in India. The NGO was very multifaceted and allowed me to work within the school and also outreach to the community in various ways.

One of the most memorable experiences was serving dinner to women and children in the community. Each evening, women and young children came to the school and sat on long rows of mats for a balanced and filling meal, likely the only meal they eat all day. These families lived in the streets, with improper clothing for the cold northern Indian winter, but after a warm meal and hot tea they all left smiling and thankful for every grain of rice. Seeing how thin and malnourished some of the small children were has really inspired me to continue service through public health and nutrition initiatives.

I was also able to help the NGO by traveling to nearby villages and distributing small bags of gifts (mostly sanitation items such as Vaseline, toothpaste, etc.) to poor children. The communities I visited consisted majorly of families living under trees, near open sewage, or in small grass huts. The children were incredibly excited to receive the gifts around New Year’s- packing the bags, distributing them, and watching the children light up made me feel like Santa Claus.
The NGO also runs a veterinary clinic for injured cows from the streets of India. The two people who ran the clinic used to have high paying jobs in the US and Europe and gave up everything to serve. I was able to visit and help care for the cows before school in the morning. Meeting people with such selfless dedication to improving the wellbeing of animals (many of which had amputated legs or very serious wounds) was truly inspiring.

I, along with a team of volunteers, was able to accomplish many of the goals we set forth. We worked with contacts in Tamil Nadu state (and also volunteered on their farms for a few days) to help farmers from the NGO (who grow vegetables for meals for the school and community) implement a composting and organic pesticide program. This was perhaps, one of the most challenging goals since the farmers were illiterate and did not know English. We worked with a translator to explain each process and begin large compost piles and pesticide mixtures from food waste from the kitchens, local plants, and cow waste. We also worked with an Indian volunteer who was literate in Hindi and English who has enthusiastically agreed to continue to help the farmers for more sustainable practices. In the long run, this will increase yield on the farm and allow more vegetables for the children and families in the community.

At the school, I helped administer 11 nutrition, health, and gardening lessons, in addition to a pre-post KAP test. We had the lessons translated verbally for the students and they responded incredibly well to the material. We did several hands on projects which included making a square-foot garden at school, and making large posters labeling different type of vegetables. Although their ages varied dramatically, we primarily worked with grades 7-11. Due to these lessons, the children had their first exposure to
how to eat a healthy diet, and now have the knowledge to begin growing vegetables in their own houses. They were excited by the new information, and asked many questions about how they can be healthier or start a garden near their home for their family. The lessons also served as a forum for Hindi-speaking students to practice speaking and/or writing English. We were able to set up a sustainable 4-H program involving several older students at school who will continue correspondence with members of 4-H at Cornell.

The other major part of the service project, and my main focus, was testing the kids for anemia. Since the children are vegetarian and do not consume adequate sources of iron, we took hemoglobin measurements, height, and weight, with consultation from the school doctor. She informed me the terrible lack of funding for basic medicines, the corruption of families selling medication, the government or private companies providing inadequate or unsafe medication, and the lack of funding from the NGO for health related expenses. I am currently writing up the formal report with guidance from the school doctor, which will include results and recommendations.

Although one of the main challenges of lowering anemia rates is implementation, the facilities at FFLV were adequate to supply monthly oral supplementation. Last year, FFLV built a hospital a few miles from the central school, hoping to further serve the community. However, it is poorly funded, poorly staffed, and has inadequate documentation for the treatment or care of any individual. Although it could be built through a generous donation, poor planning and limited additional funding rendered the hospital almost unusable. The single reputable doctor, whom operates out of a small office in the central school, claimed that the space would have been better utilized as a
shopping mall. If the building could be successfully transformed into a pre-natal care unit or women’s health clinic, I believe anemia and other disease burdens could be lessened in the area.

While there, I discovered the outrageous costs of diagnosing and treating tuberculosis, despite the fact more than 60% of the kids and community are suffering from it. If I were to return, I would focus on working with the doctor to develop a community wide treatment program. However, the main obstacle would be finding funding. Although everyone deserves to be healthy, well fed, and happy, it is not always the case; sometimes funding is the limiting reagent. However, after working in this community I am very committed to helping the NGO increase donors for health related expenses.

Overall, the trip was incredibly successful and, at times, hectic. I learned something new every day about myself or the community I was serving. It has opened my eyes to the urgent need to help small communities in developing countries who do not have access to basic sanitation, healthcare, or consistent food sources. The NGO Food for Life has begun to combat these overwhelming issues. Being a part of their constant fight to improve the community through education, nutrition, and outreach was eternally humbling. I am grateful to have been a part of it, and am committed to doing everything I can to continue the fight while back in the U.S.
Testing for Anemia (total of 200 kids tested ages 0-5 and 14-18 yrs)

Village feeding program
Handing out gifts to local villages for New Years

Working with the local farmers to explain composting and other ways to increase vegetable yield
One of the sweetest children I met on the trip—she came alone to the village feeding program every evening and loved to play afterward!
Building the square foot gardens with kids and teachers from the school.

A cow that was brought to the clinic off of the streets after being hit by a car several months ago.