Name: Anne Marie Toccket  
Hometown: Sunbury, PA  
GSPIA Degree: MID

I attended Penn State between 2002–06 and earned three bachelor’s degrees in international studies, Spanish and journalism. I’m currently a second-year master’s student at GSPIA, studying international development and NGOs and civil society. I’m also completing a certificate in Latin American social and public policy. I have a Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowship, which covers my tuition and provides a stipend. The fellowship allows me to study Quechua, the indigenous language of the Andes, and to deepen my knowledge and specialization in that region.

I chose GSPIA because of the availability of the NGO and civil society focus. I’m interested in how small, rural groups can come together to redefine “development” and create economic and social opportunity in the most isolated regions of the world. There are a number of GSPIA professors that are knowledgeable and experienced in this topic, and I have benefited from studying with them. Their courses are structured enough to provide a strong academic foundation, while also allowing students to complete papers and projects in their specific area of interest. One of my favorite things about GSPIA is its emphasis on hard skills—while a theoretical foundation is important, GSPIA recognizes the importance of skill-building and offers courses that address this need.

GSPIA students who are interested in building international skills have many opportunities to travel. During the two summers I have spent as a GSPIA student, the School has funded educational and professional trips to Peru, which allowed me to work directly with civil society organizations and observe change first-hand on the ground. I also received funding to travel to Nicaragua during spring break 2009 as part of my capstone seminar, which was a quantitative analysis of an NGO program that imports fair-trade coffee from small-scale farmers there. And as part of a one-credit course about social issues, I traveled to Cuba and conducted field research about tourism development in a closed economy.

The academic foundation that I received at Penn State, including a bachelor’s degree in Spanish, helped me to gain meaningful experience in the field before beginning my master’s degree. While at GSPIA, my coursework in human rights and other pressing international issues has given me a foundation to build on upon graduation. I recommend GSPIA to any student looking to deepen or expand their knowledge about international issues in a meaningful, practical way, with knowledgeable and experienced faculty and student body.