This summer, I plan to further my French studies by studying abroad in Montpellier for six weeks through the University of Minnesota’s Intensive Summer French language program. Such an experience would align with my extracurricular and professional goals—most notably benefiting my Circumnavigator’s Grant project, non-profit aims, and desire to join “Médecins sans Frontières”—giving me the ability to advance in my French language acquisition despite scheduling constraints posed by my Honors Program in Medical Education (HPME) and Philosophy major requirements.

In the short-term, my intensive summer language study would have a substantial, positive impact on my ability to execute a gender inequality project. Next fall, I plan to apply for the Circumnavigator’s Travel Study Grant from the Office of Undergraduate Research to research gender inequality in marriage and specifically the cultural influences that shape gender roles and marital relationships. Although I have not fully conceived the exact mechanisms by which I will look into this issue—perhaps by learning the stories of women in domestic violence programs in various countries—this will certainly be the focus of the project. Knowing French well enough to carry out an interview and interact with locals—the byproduct of this intensive language study coupled with advanced French classes at Northwestern—will act as a broadening mechanism of sorts, expanding the scope of countries I can travel to. Additionally, such language skills will allow me to personally connect with individuals in the countries I visit rather than understand their stories through a translator. The linguistic sensibilities I acquire (i.e. how French is used in everyday speech) during my intensive language study in France will help me to understand elements of stories that could be lost in translation and that are emotive in nature. Further still, advancing to such a level will also allow me to, if I wish to, do a comparative study examining gender roles in marriage in solely French-speaking countries or a mix of French and English speaking countries on different continents. I know, for example, that men “cat-call” women, but the French perception of such an action differs from that of an individual from the United States. Understanding this difference in perception within various cultural frameworks would certainly be eye-opening.

Acquiring stronger language skills also has its benefits with regards to my future work on a non-profit organization I am building: Globe-Talk. Last year, I received a $1,000 grant from the Woman’s Fund of Long Island to start a global outreach program linking students at my high school with students in Kenya at Murray Girls’ School. This program, which I am working to implement, will serve as a pilot for my non-profit endeavor, which focuses on building bridges between youth in different nations (typically youth in the United States and other countries) to foster pluralism, cultural understanding, and service-learning. In order to eventually expand the organization after the pilot program is run, I will need to build a database of schools in developing countries. Given that many countries in Africa have French as a first or second language, French would act as an enabler, allowing me not only to connect with more schools at large but also institutions that are specifically interested in a cultural, language-oriented exchange with students in United States.

French is not only an enabler from a short-term perspective; long-term, as I continue to acquire and strengthen French language skills through classes and the like, French will allow me to continue the ethic of service that has been a part of my life since my years as a Daisy Girl Scout and become a physician who works with “Médecins sans Frontières.” More commonly known as “Doctors without Borders” in the United States, this humanitarian organization seeks medical professionals who can help civilians in war-torn regions. After I graduate from Feinberg
School of Medicine and complete either my residency (the minimum requirement for working with the organization) or fellowship, I will ideally be placed in a French-speaking country such as Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire or Mali. As the “Médecins sans Frontières” website states, “A significant number of MSF’s missions are in Francophone (French-speaking) countries, and therefore French language skills are highly desirable as they allow for more opportunities for placement.” (“General Requirements”) This statement underscores the importance of French language skills in the work I aim to participate in as a physician.

This summer is the ideal time for my intensive French study abroad experience, given scheduling constraints and future goals. I have been studying French since 7th grade, in middle school, high school and at Northwestern. After completing French 201 in the fall, I got a taste of the richness of French culture and the problems plaguing contemporary and historical France: I want to further that understanding, not just get a taste, but an experience in which I gain an understanding of these issues as well as an intuitive linguistic sensibility—the same one that I have acquired for Hindi, a language I am “immersed” in at home—. As a student in the Honors Program in Medical Education, Northwestern’s BA/MD program, I have a GPA-contingent acceptance to Feinberg School of Medicine and will not need to take the MCAT in order to matriculate to Feinberg. HPME students are only at the undergraduate school however, for three years instead of four. This short time span coupled with my untraditional Philosophy major and pre-medical requirements limits space in my schedule to pursue French studies to the extent to which I would like to; these same scheduling constraints also limited my ability to take French coursework this winter. Intensive language study will help me overcome this obstacle; I can acquire French language skills rapidly and focus on developing oral expression (one of my weaknesses) to aid in my future projects and allow me to advance to higher level French classes. In addition, from a personal standpoint, a summer intensive language experience enables me to take spring quarter of my third year off to pursue business or volunteer work before I begin medical school. This coming summer is crucial; if I do not participate in an intensive language program now, my HPME requirements (particularly Organic Chemistry and Biology) would hinder my ability have such an immersive experience until perhaps fall quarter of my third year by which time I would no longer be eligible for the Circumnavigator’s Grant.

The summer intensive French language program in Montpellier appeals to me both from a practical perspective and a more academically oriented one. As an HPME student, I am required to have 36 credits to graduate, and in order to ensure that I will not have to take 5+ credits at Northwestern in future years more than once, a three credit summer program fits best for my needs. Additionally, this program does not conflict with Northwestern’s finals schedule. I was drawn to this program not only for its practical benefits, but also due to its location. I have visited Paris before and I think it would be beneficial to have an experience in Montpellier, an ethnically and economically diverse, rich historical city that is not necessarily very urban and has fewer tourists than Paris. The courses themselves focus on developing a wide range of French language skills, while oral expression, one of my weaker areas in language study, as well as my understanding of French social customs and culture, will be reinforced through interactions with locals, rigorous academic study and a homestay.