Dr. Terri Norton, Fulbright Scholar and Associate Professor from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) lead a group of seven U.S. students and one K-12 teacher from Nebraska on a 10-day field survey in Japan (June 24 - July 4, 2017). The focus of the program was to learn about the recovery and reconstruction of the Tohoku region, following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. The aim of this Learn from Disasters Field Mission (LDFM) experience is to train and mentor traditionally underrepresented minority and female students while exposing them to international research. Through this two-week summer international reconnaissance experience students learn firsthand the process necessary to recover from a natural disaster.

Dr. Norton was able to include students from UNL and University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) in her Fulbright research on the reconstruction of the Tohoku region of Japan. The selected participants were upper level undergraduate students and first year graduates from Architectural Engineering, Business Administration, Civil Engineering, Construction Management and Emergency Management degree programs.

The group began the first 3 days of the program in Tokyo where they were visited the Great Kanto Earthquake Museum, the Tokai Disaster Prevention Park and cultural sites like the Imperial Palace Garden and Asakusa Sensoji Temple. The group also visited the Tokyo Skytree, which opened in 2012 and currently stands as the world’s largest communication tower. The remaining 7 days was spent in the Iwate and Miyagi prefectures, conducting field surveys of the areas affected by the 3-11 Disaster. During the field surveys the group was able to observe the on-going reconstruction that incorporates tsunami prevention techniques of constructing large seawalls or raising ground elevation.

The mission in the Iwate prefecture began with a guided Kataribe tour of Otsuchi Town by Mio Kamitani from Oraga-Otsuchi a local non-profit organization. Students learned about the devastating “washing machine” effect the 22 meter inundation of the tsunami had on this town. It caused a fire that burned for 3 days and nights and resulted in casualty of 30% of the population. One participant is quoted as saying the most memorable part of the field survey was standing outside of the ruins of the former Otsuchi city hall building and learning about how many lives were lost at that location. While another noted the drastic change in the built landscape. The reconstruction of this area includes a 14.6 meter seawall. Other affected areas visited in Iwate include the cities of Kamaishi and Ofunato.
The tour of the Miyagi prefecture started in Minami-sanriku Town. While guided by a local survivor, the group learned that part of the reconstruction includes raising the ground elevation of the town by 8 meter. Other areas visited include the cities of Ishinomaki, Sendai and Natori. While in the Sendai area, the group explored disaster memorial centers at Arai Station and Arahama Elementary school and the Millennium Hills memorial park. Moreover, the participants attended a technical workshop hosted that Tohoku University International Research Institute for Disaster Science (IRIDeS). IRIDeS faculty discussed their research related to the disaster. Dr. Osamu Murao discussed reconstruction and urban planning and Dr. Masato Motosaka shared his work in earthquake engineering. Both Drs. Anawat Suppasri and Volker Roeber presented their work tsunami engineering. While Dr. Sebastian Borat discussed grief and memory management.

During the program, the students were able to experience several forms of transportation from the Japan Rail (JR) Shinkansen bullet train, to local rail and subway trains, to the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) buses. The efficiency of public transportation allow the group to see several sites in a short amount of time.
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