

Katherine Vachawski ‘14 Will Conduct Research on Catholicism and National Identity Formation in Lithuania.

Assumption College alumna Katherine Vachawski ’14 of Coventry, R.I., has been awarded a prestigious Fulbright U.S. Student Program scholarship. Vachawski will conduct research in Lithuania during the 2014-2015 academic year on how and whether the shared experience of Catholicism works to integrate the Polish community in Vilnius, Lithuania.

“Katherine Vachawski represents the best of an Assumption College education and embodies the finest qualities of a Fulbright Scholar,” said Assumption College President Francesco C. Cesareo, Ph.D., a former Fulbright Scholar himself. “The Assumption community is proud of her commitment to intellectual growth and cultural awareness. Katherine wants to make a difference in our world, and the Fulbright scholarship provides her the opportunity to contribute to discovering solutions to shared international concerns.”

During her year abroad in Lithuania, Vachawski will investigate how the practice of Catholicism, with some uniquely Lithuanian elements, creates a sense of unity and Lithuanian national identity for Poles in that country. She will observe religious services in Polish and Lithuanian churches in Vilnius, as well as interview Polish community parish priests to gain a deeper understanding of the role of Lithuanian religious practices in the Polish community. She will also interview Polish-speaking churchgoers to understand the extent to which religion brings them closer to native Lithuanian identities. She’ll ask, for example, whether they attend the same religious festivals and whether they engage in culinary and musical exchanges at such festivals.

“My research as a Fulbright Scholar will contribute to the field of ethnographic religious studies and, more importantly, it will reveal information about national identity formation in an ethnically diverse Lithuania,” said the 22-year-old Vachawski. “It is my hope my findings can then be used to understand other countries that are ethnically diverse and provide insights into the different ways that ethnicities assimilate.”

She will study under the supervision of Professor Milda Ališauskienė, head of the sociology department at Vytautas Magnus University in Vilnius.

The child of Polish immigrants, Vachawski graduated from Assumption with honors, double majoring in global studies with a business concentration, and in Italian Studies. Her honors thesis was “Trials and Tribulations: How the Catholic Church Remained Relevant in Poland in the 1970s.” In January, she presented a paper at the Phi Alpha Theta History National Honor Society’s Biennial Convention in Albuquerque, N.M., titled “Fighting for Youthful Souls: Catholic Church in Poland in the 1970s.”

In 2012, Assumption’s Department of Modern and Classical Languages selected Vachawski, who is fluent in Polish and Italian, to receive the Convocation Award as the College’s top major in Italian. During her junior year, she spent a semester abroad, studying in Urbino, Italy. In fall 2013, Assumption appointed her to the Worcester World Affairs Council as a student member.

Vachawski’s future professional plans include working with an international corporation before pursuing her ultimate career goal to become a U.S. Economic or Public Diplomacy Foreign Service officer. Already working on that track, she served as an intern earlier this year with the U.S. Foreign Commercial Service at the U.S. Embassy in Dublin, Ireland.

“I am the first and only one in my family to be born in and attend college in the United States,” Vachawski noted. “I chose to attend Assumption College because it parallels who I am; small and quiet at first glance, but hiding beneath the surface is something unique and extraordinary.

“Assumption College has allowed me to grow as a scholar and a young woman,” she added. “The amount of learning and knowledge one gains by going to Assumption cannot fit on a brochure.. It is a life-changing experience that has prepared me for my life.”



While a student at Assumption, Vachawski received many accolades, including the George A. Doyle Merit Award for Excellence in Economics or Global Studies; the St. Thomas Aquinas Merit Scholarship; and the Professor James McCarthy Memorial Scholarship. She also volunteered with Friendly House community shelter and Veterans Inc., both in Worcester.

“Recipients of Fulbright grants are selected on the basis of academic merit as well as demonstrated leadership potential in their fields,” said Professor Smriti Rao, Assumption College’s post-graduate scholarship advisor.

The Fulbright U.S. Student Program enables more than 1,700 U.S. citizens to study, teach, and conduct research abroad each year. This flagship international educational exchange program is sponsored by the U.S. government and is designed to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries. “Fulbrighters” meet,

work, live with and learn from the people of the host nation, sharing daily experiences. The program operates in more than 140 countries.