Middlebury was privileged to have eleven members invited by the national office to attend the GlobeMed National Summit in Evanston, IL., with nine ultimately attending. Unfortunately our plane was delayed a few hours, but the silver lining soon presented itself: breakfast and lunch at the new French crêperie in the airport, the Skinny Pancake. We used the time for work and socializing, effectively detaching ourselves from the stresses of our lives at Midd. Upon landing in Chicago O’Hare, we spent an hour sweatily scrambling behind Emily, who was promptly named Mother Duck, looking for the bus stop.

The 300 conference attendees came from colleges and universities, big and small, from across the nation and from all backgrounds. One of my roommates at the hotel was a pre-med first-year at Massachusetts Institute of Technology whose partner organization works in Togo to provide comprehensive health care. One of my close friends from high school was a summit representative of the Washington University in St. Louis chapter and is a design and communications major working in Uganda. These are only two of many examples of the beautiful diversity of the skills and interests of GlobeMed members. These students with varying goals and experiences were able to unite for three days in Evanston because of their shared passion for global health.

Maya Cohen, the Executive Director of GlobeMed’s National Office, opened the conference with a beautiful speech about the power of our generation to make meaningful change. Unfortunately we arrived mid-way through her speech but her enthusiastic message was repeated throughout the weekend by the other speakers and in our small groups.

The evening’s opening keynote was Northwestern University president Morton Schapiro who incited a mix of laughter and reflection with his charismatic charm and enthusiasm for economics. He argued that effective leaders in any field should have empathy, have humility and hold oneself accountable. He emphasized the value of accurate analysis and honest reflection; the art of failure, as he described it, was acknowledging and learning from defeats as well as successes. In order to create the space for effective advances, especially in the global health field, we need more than good goals, as he explained, “good intentions are necessary but not sufficient.”

We proceeded to watch How to Survive a Plague a documentary on AIDS activism in the US in the 80’s and 90’s. After the film, there was a panel discussion with Amira Sequeira, the National Coordinator of the Student Global AIDS Campaign and Peter Staley, a founding member of the Treatment Action Group and the primary activist featured in the documentary. Peter Staley described how his anger and personal passion for finding treatment and creating social awareness drove his work. His campaigns were successful because there was such an emotional drive for him personally; a fact that contrasted interestingly with Amira Sequeira’s passionate but not angry drive for HIV/AIDS activism.

Day two began with a hectic breakfast in the hotel, surrounded by the other 300 attendees and a few stray tourists. Little did the sightseers know they would be peacefully eating their cereal hearing snippets of conversations about obstetric fistula, HIV/AIDS and malnutrition.
Day two was chock full of inspiring and innovative speakers and panelists, and discussion contributors. One such panel was a panel of professionals who discussed the challenges and opportunities inherent in youth movements. Margo Watson, the Executive Director of FACE AIDS, raised the point that the conversation between a chapter and their partner organization must be a two way street of learning and sharing. She also stressed the importance of recognizing who is not in the room, what questions are not being asked and what stories are not being shared because of the barriers to entry in all types of social change movements. Elizabeth Newton, co-founder of the Allowance for Good, advised that in order to support one’s passion for a cause, “you must learn to see it not a work-life balance but rather alignment; find work that becomes a part of your life without draining value.”

Plenary keynote speaker, Zeenat Rahman, reiterated a lot of the overarching ideas covered by the previous speakers pertaining to global civic engagement and harnessing the power of youth drive for change. She drew our attention to the power of networking to amplify and multiply our agency to create change globally. As Secretary John Kerry’s Special Adviser on Global Youth Issues, I would have loved to hear more about her personal experiences with global youth movements and her work with Secretary Kerry.

One of the highlights of the whole conference for me came on the second night, when in a caffeine-induced daze, I met the director of Pray the Devil Back to Hell. The film portrayed the courageous women of Liberia who came together in a nonviolent movement to end the bloody civil war. The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace was an interfaith initiative, shocking many in Liberia’s polarized society. Their powerful coordination was based on the chilling fact that “a bullet does not pick and choose” and that in mourning our tears burn and taste the same. The documentary and the following discussion with director Gini Reticker really set the tone for Leymah Gwobee’s Honorary Keynote speech the next day.

Leymah Gwobee, 2011 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, is a charismatic leader, empowering speaker and a ferocious hugger. “Creating community is crucial,” and even as she spoke, our laughter, shock and collective reflection brought us together across the pews. In a community, our shared love and pains are more visible than all that divides us. She is a peace activist and leader of many inter-faith, international women’s movements and still stresses that you don’t have to be rich, powerful and connected to truly unite people together.

The Summit as a whole was enlightening and exhausting. One of the most valuable lessons I took away from the weekend was that our global goals should also touch our communities at home, a theme that Middlebury’s Summit representatives collectively have taken to heart. Local is part of global. I hope we can incorporate the valuable lessons we learned at Summit to make us better activists for social justice and global health equity in both our local and global communities. [I hope we can incorporate the valuable lessons from the Summit about community and empowerment, that we see so powerfully in Gardens for Health International, and build unity in our corner/stretch of Vermont.] (get rid of this?)