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To: MPH Program Practicum Preceptors

From: Stephen McCurdy, MD MPH
Director, UCD MPH Program

S A McCurdy MD MPH

Re: Preceptorship of MPH students for SPH 297: Public Health Practicum

Thank you for your interest in serving as a site preceptor for a UCD MPH student for a practicum project. The UCD MPH program includes coursework in the five major public health disciplines: epidemiology, biostatistics, environmental and occupational health, social and behavioral sciences, and health services administration. In addition to the course work, students complete a practicum project as part of their “Capstone Experience” for the program.

The practicum project is meant to provide the student experience in working on a real-world public health project. As a 10-unit course, we expect approximately 300 total hours. Of the total 10 units, 2 units (corresponding to about 60 hours) are completed during the Winter Quarter. The remaining 8 units (corresponding to 240 hours) are flexible. For students completing the practicum entirely in the Spring quarter, the 240 hours corresponds to three full-time days during the week. *Not all of this time must be spent on site at the sponsoring agency, but it is imperative that the preceptor maintain close contact with the student to assure adequate progress and avoid wasted effort. The student and preceptor must meet at least weekly through the course of the project.*

Many students prefer to begin their project early, and I also encourage them to spread the work out into the following Summer quarter. This relieves pressure on the Spring Quarter, allowing them to take electives and gain a more longitudinal practicum experience.

The attached information is provided to clarify expectations for the nature of the project, the preceptor, and the student. In addition, we attached a volunteer form for you to complete and to send back.

Expectations for the nature of the project:

The project is meant to provide real-world experience in public health. It is *not* meant to be solely a research project. Clearly, research is an important part of public health and may be a component of a project, but we do not want students to simply be given a data file and asked to analyze it. Similarly, students should not be asked to be the main person conducting a study, as this would effectively consume all of their time and prevent them from obtaining a broader public health perspective in the field. Ideally, students will identify preceptors working on existing public health projects in which the student can participate. Students can then identify an area of it for concentration, while retaining the broader public health context. Although students may conduct projects that are of their own design, care must be exercised to assure that such projects retain a broad public health context and are not simply “data dredging” exercises.

Examples of appropriate projects:

Develop or assist with a program promoting healthy diet among high school students

Develop or assist with an evaluation of access to mammography among women on MediCal as part of a program to improve access

Develop or assist with a program for tobacco prevention in elementary schools

Examples of inappropriate projects:

Analyze a data file of dietary preferences among high school students, looking for associations with obesity. (This could become appropriate if it were not the main activity of the project, and the student uses the data to help focus an obesity prevention project.)

Conduct an epidemiologic analysis of equine encephalitis cases in Sacramento County. (This could become appropriate if it were not the main activity of the project and the student uses the data as part of an encephalitis control project.)

Evaluate physician compliance with secondary prevention recommendations for stroke patients at hospital discharge. (Again, if the student is the main person on this, this would consume all time and leave the student with a narrow, research-predominant experience. This project could be appropriate if the research component is part of a larger whole. For example, the student could review compliance data, using it to inform development of an educational program designed to boost compliance among discharging physicians.)

A cautionary note on human-subjects requirements: Epidemiologic studies involving human subjects require approval by the UC Davis Institutional Review Board (IRB). This process can be quite involved and time consuming, and for this and other reasons, we recommend against such studies for the MPH Practicum project. (Analysis of previously collected or public data also requires IRB approval, but is simpler. Analysis of such data therefore is feasible as part of an MPH Practicum project. However, it should not be the entirety of the project, as discussed above.)

Expectations of the student

General: The student will investigate and identify a public health project and preceptor. The student will complete the project under the guidance of the preceptor. The student is expected to devote a combined total of 300 hours (for 10 units) to the project (including 60 hours from the Winter Quarter SPH 297 course). If the remaining 240 hours are completed entirely in the 10-week Spring Quarter, this corresponds to three full-time days per week. However, it is not necessary that all project hours be spent on site—the student may need to be in the field, in the library, etc. at various times to work on the project. The student should maintain close collaboration with the preceptor—including at least one face-to-face meeting per week to review progress. The student will make an oral, poster, and written presentation to colleagues at a Symposium in the Spring or Summer Quarter.

The following is a schedule of specific tasks expected of the student:

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES AND TIMELINE, MPH PRACTICUM			
Task	Due dates		Comment
	June graduates	September graduates	
Complete Practicum Agreement Form with Preceptor	Winter Quarter	Winter Quarter	Authored by student with preceptor input; describes nature of project and identifies preceptor
Begin work on project	Variable—typically begin in Winter or early Spring Quarter	Variable—typically begin in Winter or early Spring Quarter	Expectation of 300 total hours, including weekly meeting with site supervisor.
Complete mid-quarter review form with UCD faculty advisor	Spring Quarter	Variable	
Review draft of report with UCD faculty advisor	Spring Quarter	Variable	
Oral presentations at symposium	Early June as scheduled	Late August as scheduled	Presentation approximately 15 minutes, with up to 10 well crafted slides and a poster
Obtain Practicum Final Evaluation Form from onsite preceptor	Spring Quarter Early June	Late August	
Complete evaluation of SPH 297 by the student	Spring Quarter Early June	Variable	

Expectations of the preceptor

General: The preceptor will work with the student to identify and complete a public health project. The preceptor will maintain close contact with the student, meeting at least weekly. The preceptor will review progress. The preceptor will also critique the student’s oral and written presentations prior to their delivery and attend the symposium at which the oral presentation will be given. At the conclusion of the quarter, the preceptor will complete an evaluation of the student’s progress.

The following is a schedule of milestone tasks for the preceptor:

PRECEPTOR RESPONSIBILITIES AND TIMELINE, MPH PRACTICUM			
Task	Due dates		Comment
	June graduates	September graduates	
Complete Practicum Agreement Form	Variable—typically Fall or Winter Quarter	Variable—typically Fall or Winter Quarter	Authored by student with preceptor input; describes nature of project and identifies preceptor
Begin work on project	Variable—typically begin in Winter or early Spring Quarter	Variable—typically begin in Winter or early Spring Quarter	Expectation of 300 total hours, including weekly meeting with site supervisor.
Complete mid-quarter review form with UCD faculty advisor	Spring Quarter	Variable	
Review draft of report	Spring Quarter	Variable	
Oral presentations at symposium	Spring or Summer Quarter	Late August as scheduled	Presentation approximately 15 minutes, with up to 10 well crafted slides and a poster. Preceptors are strongly urged to attend.
Complete Practicum Final Evaluation Form	Spring or Summer Quarter	August	

What about financial support for the student?

Financial support from the sponsoring preceptor or agency is not currently required for our students. However, our students are trapped with rising costs for tuition and fees, and their studies make it difficult or impossible to earn significant amounts to help cover their costs. As a result, they may carry significant debt into their public health careers. Some of our practicum sites already come with a stipend, and it is our goal to increase the number of funded practicum sites. If you are able to help support your MPH student, it would be greatly appreciated. While the range varies from zero or coverage of direct expenses only (e.g., practicum-related travel) on up to \$15,000, a typical amount is \$5,000 for the entire preceptorship.