

Q/A With Your MPH Alumni Board

Every year, MPH students submit questions to the UC Davis MPH Alumni Board, and we answer you with our personal stories. This document is intended to be a dynamic and lasting resource that can be modified as more questions are added. To ask a question of your Alumni Board, email MPHAlumniBoard@ucdavis.edu with the subject line: "Q/A"

About MPH:

- **How do you explain what an MPH is to people?**
 - An MPH helps you assess the health of a population as well as better understand the interventions to improve overall health and prevent harm to the population at large - it basically focuses on the group of people rather than individual patients, with an emphasis on evaluation of all contributing factors. It takes into account the environments - natural, social, economic, political, physical, etc.
 - It's hard work that earned me letters after my name.
 - Have you ever seen the movie, Contagion?
 - There are other health careers out there besides doctors and nurses. A Master of Public Health is a graduate level degree that focuses on health promotion and illness prevention at the population level. A doctor may be able to help an individual patient to quit smoking, but public health practitioners helped get laws passed to prohibit tobacco sales to minors, thereby preventing entire generations from the health effects of smoking, which is the number one cause of morbidity and mortality in the U.S.
 - An MPH is a professional degree that gave me the tools and mindset to investigate how we can better detect, prevent, treat and control illness, and promote health and well-being at population levels.

- **How do you embody the values of public health within your personal life?**
 - It's made me "practice what I preach." For example, I get my flu vaccination so that I can do my part and those that cannot be vaccinated are protected by our herd immunity. I also try to maintain a more active lifestyle than before I finished the program.
 - It has caused me to take a "root cause" look at pretty much everything and anything in my life and in this world. Nothing again will ever be simple, but a big picture of complex interacting factors where prevention is key.

- **If an MPH student pursues the epi area of concentration, what would make this MPH student stand out compared to say a student with a Master's degree in epi? Basically, what benefit is it to get an MPH with epi focus, when you can get a Master's or PhD in epi?**
 - An MPH is usually more rounded than just a masters in EPI, and achieving a PhD in EPI takes additional time.
 - The MPH at UC Davis is more geared toward the practice of public health rather than the study of public health, which is often associated with a PhD

- Do you want to get the numbers, or use the numbers? A masters or PhD in epi is fabulous, but would really corral you into studying the patterns and distribution of disease pretty heavily, without placing too much emphasis on what to do once you get those numbers. If illness and disease patterns and how to improve how we detect and collect those patterns are what fascinate you, the concentrated MS or PhD might be your thing. If your thing is instead what to do with the patterns and numbers once we get them, the MPH is an excellent start at fulfilling the “implementation” bug.
- **What has having an MPH meant for your career trajectory?**
 - Earning an MPH is not a requirement for my job. However, having an understanding in public health means that I can appreciate projects that focus on a population rather than an individual, and upstream rather than downstream interventions.
 - On a practical level, To the outside world, having an MPH means I have the capacity to be a good writer, critical thinker, and evaluator in almost any area of health. I strive to be all those things anyway, but the MPH strengthened those skills, and gives me credibility in those areas. On a more personal note, having an MPH has caused me to think in a totally different way, altering my career trajectory in almost every way.

Job Search:

- **Where should we look for a job after we graduate?**
 - Everywhere. Do not count anything out and apply for anything that even remotely sparks your interest. You never know what will come of something. Do not be afraid to ask for references or letters of recommendation and ask everyone you know, even people you think that have no connection to the world of public health, if they know anyone who is hiring. There are opportunities everywhere but you HAVE TO FIND THEM!!!!
 - I looked on craigslist - and also keep feelers on LinkedIn forums of my area of interest
 - Network, attend conferences
 - Join professional organizations that have job postings, such as CPHA-N (they have a FREE student membership! (<http://cphan.org/>), APHA (<http://www.apha.org/>), or PHI (<http://www.phi.org>)
 - CDPH links below
 - Use your connections! Write them an email to catch up. Explain that you’ve just graduated, can now breathe, and would love to catch up (if comfortable acquaintance) or something more professional for less comfortable acquaintances. I was offered three different jobs after going to lunch just to catch up with a epidemiologist I used to volunteer for.
 - Take temp or contract positions until you find a full time thing. Then work hard, and give it your all. They may very well offer you a full time position, or network you elsewhere if they like you.

- **Who are some potential employers outside of the Sac region? For example, in the Bay Area?**
 - CDPH has a branch in Richmond.
 - There 61 Local Public Health jurisdictions in California
 - There are many, many non-profit organizations in the bay area
 - Oakland is home to several public health organizations: Prevention Institute (<http://www.preventioninstitute.org/about-us/jobs-a-internships.html>), Public Health Institute (<http://www.phi.org/about-phi/employment/>)
 - Kaisers everywhere
 - Don't limit yourself. Look around at what you are interested in.

- **Do you enjoy your current job in public health**
 - Yes, the PH field is full of energetic and dedicated folks and some of the more innovative people I have worked with (I guess if you always have to do more with less every year you have to get creative...)
 - I enjoy the variety in my job. Public Health is so broad that I have opportunities to get involved in various projects.
 - Absolutely. Great, committed people. A little all over the place at times, but things certainly don't get boring!

- **What's reasonable compensation? How long did you have to work until you were at a decent salary (ie 50-60k).**
 - My starting salary was just under 50k, but I wasn't working full time, so could have been about 50, if I had - included benefits.
 - A Research Scientist 1 at CDPH earns between \$4,833 - \$6,006 per month: <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/services/jobs/Documents/ResearchScientist/Research%20Scientist%20bulletin.pdf>
 - A Health Program Specialist at CDPH earns between \$4833 - \$5874 per month: http://www.cdph.ca.gov/services/jobs/Documents/ContinueOpen/HPSI_8H1BG.pdf
 - But remember that there are many more factors to compensation than just a salary, such as location, benefits, retirement, vacation time, schedule flexibility, travel requirements, status/prestige, publication opportunities, professional development opportunities, room for growth/promotions, etc. As with all things, you're values weigh differently among these various factors, so you'll need to evaluate your options based on your values and priorities.
 - Second the above comment. Taking a position with the university can get you a lower salary, but more flexible time, ¾ future tuition reduction (if you are thinking of doing further education), and innovative, fast-paced opportunities. Look at your offers and opportunities, and consider what is most important to you carefully.

- **If I don't know people at the state department how hard is it to get a job there?**
 - With or without knowing someone in CDPH, you need “get on the lists.” To get on the lists, you’ll need to take the exam for each list (e.g. list for Research Scientist 1), and then you’ll receive offers for interviews in the mail. It’s not a matter of difficulty, it’s more a matter of time. This time depends on when you submit your test, when openings arise, and if other factors delay (like a hiring freeze) or speed up (like ACA implementation) the hiring process. (see links above)

- **What public health jobs are available if you don't want to work in government?**
 - Pharmaceutical industry or anywhere “population health” knowledge is needed
 - Not For Profits are a great employer especially if you want to work internationally
 - If you combine PH knowledge with other skills, like informatics, there are a lot of private jobs (vendors, healthcare organizations, service providers for terminology management)
 - Teaching, education, research
 - Sometimes the government is a pass through job that enhances your qualifications for other jobs; e.g. - fellowships
 - Public health policy researcher organizations

- **How was the decision to pursue a masters in public health related to where you are now in your career? Could you have ended up where you are now through another route?**
 - I probably would have had to have some degree from the US, since my approbation as a doctor in Germany does not afford me any letters after my name here, but I am using mostly non MPH skills in my current work.
 - My current position does not require an MPH. But by completing the program and taking advantage of opportunities from the guest speakers and faculty, I was able to network and land the job I have now. A lot of it is also about timing. When we graduated as an undergrad, there were hiring freezes, furloughs, and cutbacks. It was difficult to find jobs. Instead I went back to school and by the time I graduated, those hiring freezes, furloughs, and cutbacks weren’t as strict. And with a graduate level degree (sure, not specifically an MPH) I was qualified for more jobs.
 - I could do what I am doing now without an MPH. But I wouldn’t have networked with this person, or be given the opportunities I have been given here. Several people without MPH’s have worked for my boss, but when he was offered the opportunity to work abroad in areas of public health, I was uniquely qualified to work with him there and therefore got to do alot of traveling.... An opportunity I would not have been afforded without the MPH. In terms of future career, without having given some serious thought to population level and prevention health, I would not have cued into some deep interests that I didn’t know existed for me. Would I have gotten there through another path? Perhaps. We’ll never know.

- **Why are you not currently working in public health and do you ever see yourself doing something more “traditional” within the realm of public health?**
 - The answer to this for me is very simple, a non-public health position was offered to me first (and I had a history there). I applied for a ton (and I mean it) public health jobs but the process was so daunting and confusing that I eventually focused my attention on the jobs that seemed to actually want me which were more social work focused. Since that is the world where most of my network was already established and I had a name for myself it was easier to navigate and landed myself a good job. I would enjoy working in a traditional public health job but for now I enjoy the craziness of higher education.

Practicum:

- **How do you suggest we tackle the practicum project? Whats a good strategy? What are some resources to help get through the project?**
 - Choose something that interests you
 - Try something outside of your comfort zone. I did, and it was one of the best things I ever did. It allowed me to practice a skill set I already had but in a very different setting. I was able to network with a whole segment of the industry that I never would have otherwise crossed paths with.
 - Do not be afraid to take a practicum in an area that you have no intention of working in after, you will NOT be pigeon-holed. Skills are transferrable and having a diverse range of professional experiences is a good thing.
 - Be proactive. Talk to the guest speakers. Do not expect things to just be handed to you.
 - Don't try to save the world. Don't try to map out the rest of your life with this project. Consider your priorities.
 - Really pay attention to your guest speakers. They often have projects that need your help. Amber and the MPH faculty and staff have done a lot over the years to put together practicums for students that are “wrapped up in a nice bow.” In other words, the project is clear cut. You don't have to do much negotiating and checking to make sure your project is appropriate. Otherwise, you'll need to negotiate with a preceptor on a project that 1. interests you, 2. interests them, 3. satisfies program requirements, and 4. pays. It's hard to have it all, especially if you're in a time crunch.
 - Choose something doable, achievable, with future steps to leave behind for someone else, if you aren't planning to continue to work in that area. You will feel better about the experience, and you can reference for future employers what your “baby” blossomed into eventually. .
- **Do employers ask about the practicum?**
 - I wasn't specifically asked about my practicum, however, I used my practicum experience during all of my interviews. It helps provide concrete examples that you can draw upon.
 - They'll probably ask about past achievements or publishings. You can cite your work, especially if you had a deliverable.

- **How important is the specific topic you choose for the practicum in the larger picture? Does the practicum restrict you or narrow your job opportunities in any way?**
 - That is something that happens all the time. Even though your practicum is in one field, you're not locked into that field for the rest of your career. The best thing to do is gain transferable skills that you can use in any position: project management, prioritizing, communication, statistics, basics of public health, adult/youth learning, recruitment, outreach, evaluation, data collection, surveys, policy work, etc.
 - It didn't for me. The practicum is for your benefit rather than your resume. If it's in your field of interest, you will learn and become more qualified.
 - Nope. Take your practicum as you should take any other short term contract work, temp work, or really-any work in general and it will be beneficial to you one way or another. Work hard. Be diligent. Take notice of what you are doing. Learn. "Do all you can with what you have, in the time you have, in the place you are." - Nkosi Johnson

Desired Skills:

- **Are there specific skills, areas of expertise that students should gain in general for applying to public health jobs?**
 - Communication skills are important in any situation!
 - Running meetings or taking notes, writing reports, powerpoint and visio are common, presentations are often needed, so public speaking is a plus.
 - Project management skills are sought after and being a good business analyst, i.e being able to talk to folks in different parts of an organization and connecting their needs.
 - If you can read contracts or write grants / RFPs, you are in another ballpark
 - Skills in statistical software programs (see links above)
 - Knowledge of the legislative world (how laws are passed at the local, county, state, federal levels, how to monitor bills, etc)
 - Outreach and networking skills
 - Before applying to a job, make sure you're familiar with the company and its mission. Tailor your cover letter, resume, and application to match the job description.
- **How important is it (in general) to have solid biostatistics skills?**
 - It is desired to have a good biostatistics knowledge, because it will enable you to better analyze literature as well as interpret collected data and the relevant relationships between them. If you are in a field that designs trials, then it is also important because it will help you properly construct the hypothesis as well as decide on adequate sample size and composition, enabling you to produce more meaningful data.
 - Solid biostatistics skills also helps you stand out among applicants. Biostatistics, as you know, is complex. Having a solid understanding and knowing where to turn to for resources makes you a valuable asset to any project.
 - Memorizing your stats lectures and procedures isn't super important. P values are. Understanding research results, and being able to interpret what they mean, and what they don't mean are. Try to look at it in a big picture fashion. You likely won't be asked to do a super complicated analysis on your own unless that's in your job description.

- **Are there specific stats programs that are somewhat essential to know to work in the field (e.g. SAS, SPSS, etc.)?**
 - SAS is the program of choice for many public institutions, but SPSS is still used as is Stata and R. As long as you know one of these, you'll be in good shape. It's also wise to know how to do some of the basic statistics in Excel or other data visualization tools like tableau or even SurveyMonkey.
 - If you have access to one of these statistical programs, it would be wise for you to hone your skills in one or all of them. Although they can be expensive, sometimes there are student discounts. You also have access to SAS in the computer lab of Hutchinson, where Dr. Hogarth taught. You can still access those computers until you graduate.
 - There are plenty of resources that you can use to teach yourself. Here are a few that we've used:
Stata: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVk4G4nEtBS4tLOyHqustDA>
SAS: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtOiaxdcY_6RsRUpBg_2LoQ
Excel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkndrGoNpUDV-uia6a9jwVg>

- **How useful is it to have the "CPH" credential? Is the CPH exam "hard"?**
 - The CPH exam is not "easy." It is quite expensive and requires plenty of preparation. However, you have a network of UC Davis MPH Alumni to study with. Let the Board know if this is something you'd be interested in.
 - When you find out, let us know what you think!
 - A few of our classmates took it and passed. I don't think it was undoable, but it wasn't easy, either. Like anything, useful in that you can put it on your resume, and it will make you eligible for a more broad array of opportunities. The verdict is still out in the public health community of whether this is a super important credential to have or not. Take it early, see if your employer will pay for it.