

# student profiles

## Doctoral Student Was First in Family to Attend College

AS A THIRD-YEAR STUDENT in the school's Dr.P.H. in Biostatistics program, **ROBIN JEFFRIES** is reveling in the challenges of her discipline. In addition to her coursework, Jeffries has been assisting UCLA School of Public Health faculty members on two studies. For Project Connect, a multi-center study testing interventions aimed at reducing teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, Jeffries works for Drs. Abdelmonem A. Afifi and William Cumberland in the Department of Biostatistics; she also assists Dr. Pamina Gorbach, associate professor of epidemiology, in her role as an investigator on an HIV microbicide clinical trial. "It's been an incredible experience to learn at the side of these professors," Jeffries says.

Both studies find Jeffries working with self-report survey data in which there is the potential for "missing values" – a common problem that statisticians have developed methods to overcome. "These studies are asking sensitive questions that rely on people's memories," Jeffries explains. "Respondents might forget, fudge their answers, or give conflicting reports, and so the challenge is to make the data as 'clean' as possible." It's a challenge Jeffries has embraced. "Part of my nature is to want everything to be just right...to have all the ducks in a row," she quips.

Jeffries' enthusiasm for the academic environment has to do with the fact that she never took it for granted that she would come so far. "It was a long journey," she says. "We didn't have a lot when I was a kid." Raised by her mother in Chico, in a rural part of California 90 miles north of Sacramento, Jeffries was the first in her family

to attend college. She started at a community college majoring in biology but found she couldn't stay away from the math courses. At the urging of one of her calculus professors she took a statistics class. "I instantly fell in love, because I could see that it wasn't just theoretical – this was something I could apply in everyday life," she says.

When she transferred to California State University, Chico, Jeffries decided to double-major in biology and statistics. There, a conversation with a chemistry professor as Jeffries was pondering which direction to take in graduate school proved fateful. "I said I didn't know what to do – I really liked biology and I really liked statistics," Jeffries recalls. "He suggested I look into biostatistics programs. I hadn't even known they existed." Jeffries ultimately chose the UCLA School of Public Health, where a Graduate Opportunity Fellowship would cover her first year of education. (As a Dr.P.H. student, Jeffries would receive more assistance as the recipient of the school's Wayne SooHoo Memorial Scholarship.)

At first, her intention was to stay only for her master's degree. But as the two-year program was ending, Jeffries decided she had to continue. "I thought to myself, 'I'm not finished – there's still more I want to learn,'" she says. While she is still deciding on the course she'll take once she obtains her Dr.P.H., Jeffries is excited about the possibilities. "As a biostatistician, I can work with public health professionals and clinicians on a variety of different problems with real-life applications," Jeffries says. "That's very exciting to me."



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