

LESSONS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: Students Gain Experience Through Practicum Requirement

At the UCLA School of Public Health, students gain the skills and knowledge they will need to become leading professionals. But their education is not confined to the classroom. As part of their M.P.H. degree requirement, students find a health-related field placement and work there for a period of time, applying the concepts they have learned in real-world settings. As the following case studies illustrate, this practicum requirement not only affords students invaluable learning opportunities, but also enables them to make significant contributions to the community en route to getting their degree.



At Santa Monica's Center for Healthy Aging, Maggard (above left) helped to launch a nonprofit transportation service for seniors.

assisted Santa Monica's Center for Healthy Aging as it prepared to launch the first replication of the Independent Transportation Network (ITN), a community-based, nonprofit transportation service for seniors that has operated in Portland, Maine, for 10 years, and is now being brought by the Center for Healthy Aging to seniors in the greater Santa Monica area, thanks to support from the Archstone Foundation. ITN mimics private vehicle ownership by using automobiles with both paid and volunteer drivers to provide service 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "Seniors who use the service become dues-paying members and open 'personal transportation accounts' to pay for rides," Maggard explains. "The program is self-sustaining via innovative payment programs and voluntary local community support, without relying on taxpayer dollars." Rides are scheduled to begin next spring.

Maggard helped to move the replication project forward by following up with media contacts; conducting research on automobile insurance policy, dealership laws, and licensure regulations; expanding the stakeholder list; creating informative literature; and assisting with the first ITNSantaMonica public forum, which was held at Emeritus College in September and attracted nearly 70 community members. As a result of her internship, Maggard was invited to the ITNAmerica National Summit in Maine the following month. "I now have an opportunity to pursue research on the phases of older adult mobility," Maggard adds. "This project provided great exposure to the field and experience with an exciting and innovative program."

Securing Safe Travels for Seniors

Katie Maggard, M.P.H. Student
Community Health Sciences

For Katie Maggard, it was the perfect internship – one that combined her interest in public transportation with work on an important issue affecting older adults: the decision to stop driving.

"Moving from the driver's seat to the passenger's seat can be traumatic," Maggard explains. "Automobiles are symbols of independence. They offer freedom, control, convenience, and social interaction." Public transportation is often difficult to navigate or limited, she adds, forcing many older people to become dependent on family and friends. Thus, Maggard says, "Older adults experiencing age-related changes that compromise their safety may continue to drive because they see no alternative equal to owning and piloting their own vehicle."

With funding from the Wilshire Foundation, Maggard



Berridge's internship took her to the World Health Organization in Switzerland.

supervision of Dr. Ritu Sadana (M.S.P.H. '87, D.S.), senior scientist and policy analyst, she spent the fall contributing to the analysis of a survey module on financial flows for health research, and to a sub-analysis guide for national health accounts. "Working in a multidisciplinary setting and international team is extremely rewarding," Berridge says. WHO interns gain exposure to other UN organizations and are able to attend regularly held seminars. On her first day, Berridge listened to Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, WHO director-general emeritus, speak on world health and security.

Berridge plans to return to UCLA for the Winter Quarter. "I look forward to applying what I have learned from both internships to my coursework and class discussions, and future career," she says.

Macro-Level Experience at Home and Abroad

Shelley Berridge, M.P.H. Student, Health Services

Early in her career, Shelley Berridge sought front-line health care experience, both domestic and international. She managed nonprofit community clinics focusing on HIV/AIDS and reproductive health for vulnerable and underserved populations. "I understood that gaining diverse health perspectives would contribute to my effectiveness as a public health professional," she says.

Berridge saw her department's required summer internship as an opportunity to explore health care systems at the macro-level. When she received two extraordinary internship offers – both of which would find her working with well-placed alumni of UCLA and the School of Public Health – she felt she had to accept both.

Last summer, Berridge served as an administrative intern at Cedars-Sinai Medical Network System in Beverly Hills. She was attracted to the organization by the leadership and mentoring qualities of its CEO, Tom Gordon. "He sharpened my management skills while giving me broad exposure to the components of operating a multi-specialty group with almost 80 physicians," says Berridge, who took part in the purchase negotiations and implementation phase of a new electronic medical record system.

For this fall, Berridge deferred classes to join the Evidence and Information for Policy (EIP) cluster at the World Health Organization headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. EIP provides technical support and policy recommendations to health systems in 192 member countries. Under the

Prevention Services to Help At-Risk Youth and Families COPE

Evan King, M.P.H. Student, Health Services
M.A. Student, Latin American Studies

When he went in to the offices of the non-profit health care corporation COPE (Community Outreach for Prevention and Education) to accept an internship position in which he would work with CEO Allen Miller (M.P.H. '01), Evan King was confident he had chosen the right organization for the experience he sought. COPE's mission – to make communities healthier – matched King's interest in being part of an innovative, community-driven organization.

King knew that Miller would be anxious to orient him with the work ahead, a continuation of efforts begun by the previous UCLA School of Public Health intern. "That said," King notes, "to say that I hit the ground running is an understatement." Anxious not to forego the final week of his spring break, he had planned to merely offer his formal acceptance of the position and discuss his schedule for the following quarter. Some hours later, as he sat in his new office, revising his first draft of an IT strategy proposal, King marveled at his preceptor's management style. "Both endearing and persuasive, Allen has a way of empowering those within the organization by inviting them to manage a project that at first may appear to be just out of reach," he says. "Six months later, I had completed a consulting report for a major medical center, immersed myself in the development and daily operations of a groundbreaking community-based program, and met with phenomenal staff, administrators, executives, and various health care stakeholders."

From the outset, King understood the purpose of taking on challenges presented to the organization by the health care system and its patients; with time, he says, he came to realize that above all else, he worked for an organization that simultaneously builds the capacity of its team members with each additional project and program. "Knowing that as much consideration is put into developing staff as to finding health care solutions reassures me that COPE is a personal investment in my career," he says.



King (left) works with Allen Miller (M.P.H. '01), CEO of Community Outreach for Prevention and Education (COPE).

Building a Patient Education Resource Center

Dahianna Lopez, M.P.H. Student, Community Health Sciences



At the West Los Angeles VA, Lopez built the PERC from scratch.

Dahianna Lopez's summer experience was one she never imagined she would have as a graduate student. As an intern at the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration Hospital, the largest hospital in the nationwide VA network, Lopez was asked to help establish a patient education resource center (PERC) in the main lobby of the hospital. The PERC was envisioned as a place where patients could obtain free health information in the form of pamphlets, brochures, videos, online resources, 3-D models, individual counseling, and classes taught by certified clinicians. "I started off with an empty room," Lopez recalls, "and my job was to network with members of different departments at the VA in order to establish the center."

The internship was both hands-on and varied. "Sometimes I would dress in jeans and a sweatshirt and get my hands dirty by unpacking boxes and stocking the shelves," Lopez says. "Other times, I came in with heels and a suit because I had presentations to give to hospital executives and doctors about the importance of health education and the opening of the new center. Every day was different." In 12 weeks, the empty room was transformed to an attractive center with substantial amounts of well-organized health information. At the grand opening ribbon-cutting ceremony in September, the hospital's CEO and a former prisoner of war cut the ribbon.

When the internship was over, Lopez was asked to stay for another year to help run the center and direct its new staff. "I look forward to helping expand the services the PERC offers and making it a place where veterans can improve their health by becoming better informed," she says. The experience has convinced her that she wants to become an advanced practice nurse with a public health and administrative position. Explains Lopez: "I would like to be able to make an impact on patients' lives through improvements in primary care standards, changes in hospital policies, and an increase in programs focused on prevention."

Clearing the Air on Environmental Health Disparities Among Children

Marie Sharp, Dr.P.H. Student, Epidemiology

For Marie Sharp, last summer was spent working with Communities for a Better Environment (CBE), an environmental health and justice nonprofit organization whose mission is to combat the disproportionate location of environmental hazards in low-income California communities of color.

As a Colombian-American, Sharp wanted to work in the Latino community, and as an epidemiology student, she was interested in CBE's study, "Children's Health Disparities, Ambient Air Toxics and Health Risks in Southeast Los Angeles," funded by First 5 LA and the UCLA Center for Community Partnerships. The study used "participatory action research" methods in which the focus was on collaborating with community members to design, develop, and implement a strategy to examine environmental issues, asthma in young children, and health disparities in Southeast Los Angeles.

In collaboration with her faculty advisor, Dr. Beate Ritz, and Guadalupe Vidales, a UC Irvine Ph.D. student in social ecology, Sharp conducted the statistical data analysis and wrote up the final report of the study findings. Her group examined the distributions of demographic, environmental, and health variables and described the prevalence of asthma and other respiratory symptoms experienced by children ages 0-5. Sharp's group also compared the demographics and symptom reports with findings from the Los Angeles County Health Survey.

The study results suggest that there were adverse health disparities in young children compared to the general Los Angeles County population. "The report will serve as a starting point for future research into lifestyle, environmental, and health care factors affecting children," Sharp says, adding that the findings will be disseminated into the community and to policy-makers.

"It was a tremendous experience for me to work with these data and help transform the results into a voice for the community from which they came," Sharp concludes. "I learned that there is much work to be done to improve the environment and provide accessible health care for disadvantaged Americans and immigrants living in Los Angeles."

Sharp (right) teamed with Guadalupe Vidales of UC Irvine on the Communities for a Better Environment study.





Chan conducted safety inspections at Shell Los Angeles Refinery.

An ‘Eye-Opening’ Experience in Industrial Hygiene

Austin Chan, M.P.H. Student, Environmental Health Sciences

Austin Chan describes his summer internship at Shell Los Angeles Refinery as an “eye-opening experience like no other” – a chance to practice his industrial hygiene skills in a very traditional setting, yet with a freedom to explore on his own.

As an industrial hygiene intern, Chan was given the opportunity to assess worker exposure to chemical threats such as benzene and hydrogen sulfide, evaluate heat stress during hot summer days, and implement a new eye-protection policy. Looking for a challenge, he entered the internship expecting a “grimy” work environment and uncooperative employees; instead, Chan says, he found a high priority for health and safety at all levels in the plant, from the hourly contract workers to the upper management.

With an array of industrial hygiene instrumentation available to use at his discretion, Chan became technically savvy faster than he had anticipated. “Through my daily interactions with the refinery field operators, I learned that an industrial hygienist’s ability to clearly, succinctly, and convincingly communicate health risks to workers is paramount – perhaps even more so than any analytical skills,” he says. “While an industrial hygienist’s daily responsibilities may involve a lot of

safety monitoring, exposure assessment, and health education, I came to learn that every day offers exciting, and sometimes unexpected, challenges.” One morning, for example, Chan found himself helping to investigate the chemical cause of a swollen tongue; later that day, he was involved in an emergency response to a gas leak.

“Working in an oil refinery is inherently very dangerous, and definitely not for the faint of heart,” Chan says. “Nonetheless, it is surely an environment that I wouldn’t mind returning to, because now I truly appreciate the importance of industrial hygiene in mitigating that danger, and even preventing disaster.”

Community Education at the Border

Cristina Reyes, M.P.H. Student, Community Health Sciences

Christina Reyes’ interest in public health stems from her desire to improve access to services and prevention education for low-income monolingual Spanish-speaking populations in California. Thus, she was excited to have the chance last summer to work for the Binational Border Health Program (BBHP) of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services. Reyes designed and implemented an evaluation of the BBHP’s Road to Health Project, which sends community health workers to 10 Latin American consulates in Los Angeles to conduct presentations to clients on topics varying from breast and prostate cancer to obtaining low-cost medical and dental services in Los Angeles County.

“Conducting the evaluation afforded me an excellent opportunity to understand the inner workings of a local government health program,” says Reyes, whose responsibilities included analyzing data collected by the health educators regarding the Road to Health participants and conducting interviews and focus groups with the health education staff, program directors and consulate personnel. The internship experience, she says, gave her a better understanding of the importance of communication among agency staff and between the agency and outside collaborators for ensuring that effective public health messages are delivered to the community.

“Improvements can always be made in even the most successful public health programs, whether in resources and materials, presentation and delivery, or internal adjustments to program objectives and performance measures to better serve the population,” Reyes says. “I believe the evaluation was a great asset to the program, and that all programs and/or agencies would benefit from taking a step back to evaluate their effectiveness not only with their target populations, but also in their internal functioning.” Her experience at BBHP heightened Reyes’ interest in the field of evaluation of community health programs, and she plans to continue to pursue similar work in the future.



Reyes designed and implemented an evaluation of a health promotion program.