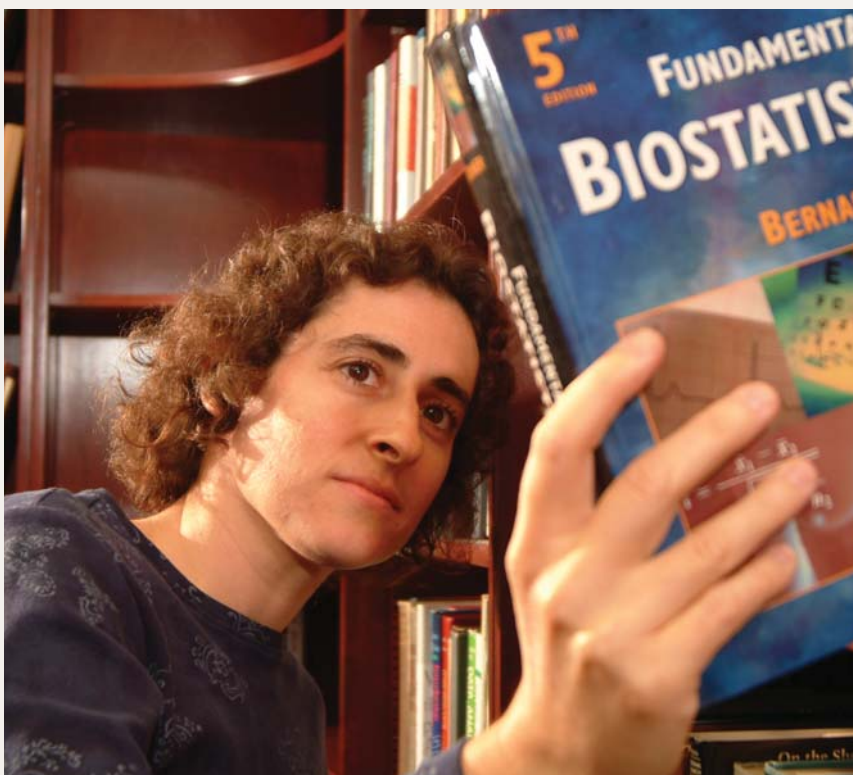


Circuitous Journey Has Rewarding Finish For Biostatistics Student Susan Alber

THE PATH **SUSAN ALBER** HAS TAKEN in her post-high school education – starting as a student at the Berklee College of Music in Boston and ending up in the UCLA School of Public Health’s Ph.D. program in biostatistics – has been, to say the least, unconventional.



She has attended seven colleges, and had full-time jobs at four universities. After deciding a career in music wasn’t in the cards, she earned an associate degree in biology, then attended Cornell University for a B.S. in nutrition. That was followed by several years as a technician in a food microbiology lab at Rutgers University before Alber returned to Cornell for an M.S. in nutrition. It was back into the workplace before she decided on biostatistics, first earning an M.A. at UC Berkeley before heading south to UCLA for her doctoral studies.

“I’ve wandered around for a long time to get here,” Alber says, laughing. “I was always bored and unhappy with the jobs I had, or that I could see having in the future.”

That began to change with her first statistics class at Rutgers, along with the research she did there in developing mathematical models for predicting bacterial growth rates. As a scientist, Alber had never much enjoyed the often-tedious process of collecting data. “But once the data is collected and you’re at the point where you can look at it and learn something from it...that part I find really interesting,” she says.

For her doctoral work, Alber is analyzing data on the effects of lead on cognitive functioning. The toxicity of high levels of lead in the blood is well established, but the subtle behavioral and cognitive impairment resulting from lower levels has been a source of controversy. Alber’s dissertation research will develop a new version of the statistical modeling strategy known as longitudinal data analysis to examine data on the impact of lead on laboratory rats’ abilities to learn specific responses to an alternative series of environmental cues.

Alber’s ambition involves not just conducting research in biostatistics, but also teaching it. Through her many experiences, she has discovered that it’s an activity in which she excels. “Enough people have told me I’d be a good teacher that I’m starting to believe it,” Alber quips. She suspects her aptitude for teaching stems from the fact that learning about statistics hasn’t come easily for her. “When you have to struggle, and look at something in many different ways before it clicks in, you can more easily appreciate what is confusing to others,” she says.

Having had experiences at so many universities, Alber says the instruction she has encountered as a student in the UCLA School of Public Health’s Department of Biostatistics has been second to none. “We are fortunate to have a number of really wonderful and exceptional teachers,” she says. “They care about teaching, and put a lot of energy into it.” Insisting that the Ph.D. will be her final degree, Alber looks forward to following in the paths of her instructors via a university position that will emphasize teaching: “To be able to take difficult material and make it more digestible for students learning it for the first time gives me a great sense of fulfillment.”

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