Graduate Voices

Departing MPH grads describe the varied paths they followed in the course of achieving their developmental goals, sharing insights and experiences for the benefit of incoming students.

Alex Breskin, MPH 2015

During my studies at Mailman, I had the privilege of participating in several research projects with faculty members at CUMC. My primary research has been with Dr. Ryan Demmer working on the Oral Infections Glucose Intolerance and Insulin Resistance Study (ORIGINS). We have been looking at associations between the oral microbiome and prediabetes. My role in this study has been to implement and develop methods most suitable for analyzing microbiome data. From my work on ORIGINS, I have had the opportunity to collaborate with researchers from around the country and present my research at national conferences. I have also participated in research with the Center for Advanced Cardiac Care at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, where I assist cardiologists in designing studies and analyzing data in order to explore health outcomes among patients with ventricular assist devices for advanced heart failure.

“From my work on ORIGINS, I have had the opportunity to collaborate with researchers from around the country and present my research at national conferences.”

Aaron Sarvet, MPH 2015

During my summer practicum I worked on a project with the Bureau of Children, Youth & Families in the Division of Mental Hygiene at our city’s Department of Health. Alarmed by reports of high rates of non-suicidal self-injury behavior (self-harm - like cutting, and burning - without the intent to die) in other cities, and primed by a long but under-attended history of mental health disparities that burden sexual minorities, we planned an analysis to examine if sexual minority youth reported higher risks of non-suicidal self-injury than heterosexual youth, and if this higher risk could be explained by a higher risk of depressive symptoms. The results of our analysis supported our predictions, and we were able to present our analyses in a number of forums, including at the Department of Health, at the New York City Epidemiology Forum, and at our own Department's Epidemiology Master’s Students Day. It was extremely gratifying work, and was especially amazing to know that I could contribute to an important scientific and social conversation about mental health disparities after only one year of training in the Master’s program! It inspired me to pursue a similar line of research with my Master’s thesis, which I hope to continue after I graduate and beyond.
Khudejha Asghar, MPH 2015

For the last year, I have been working in the Population and Family Health department on a mixed-methods evaluation of an adolescent girls’ life skills program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, and Pakistan. I spent my practicum abroad developing the formative phases of the evaluation, which included testing quantitative and qualitative tools for relevance and understanding by refugee populations in Ethiopia, and adapting the principles of running a randomized control trial to the context. The focus of this project is to reduce adolescent girls’ exposure to violence, and I have used knowledge from my Epidemiology coursework to train Ethiopian staff on quantitative research and help develop a sampling strategy. Prior to that, I spent a semester researching sexual violence and creating a manual for universities seeking to improve their sexual assault prevention and response strategies, with assistance from department faculty such as Dr. Kate Walsh.

Leona Zahlan, MPH 2014

I chose to pursue a degree in epidemiology at Mailman after developing an interest in public health while growing up in Ghana. Observing the mental health impact of HIV positive women who are stigmatized and ostracized from their families and villages inspired me to learn how to use research and data to inform policy. For my global health practicum, I worked with the Global Mental Health Program and the World Health Organization (WHO) on field studies to inform the revision of the International Classification of Disease, known as the ICD-11, with a focus on sexual health in the Arab region. My placement was at the American University of Beirut Medical Center in Lebanon, a primary collaborating university on the development of the ICD-11. Additionally, I had the opportunity to travel to WHO stakeholder meetings in Mexico City and Dubai to present the findings from the mapping of sexual health services in the Arab region to make cross-cultural comparisons. Columbia has given me the opportunity to work closely with inspiring and experienced professors, in New York City and globally, who have guided and trained me throughout my graduate experience. Through meeting Dr. Silvia Martins at Columbia, I was able to connect with a researcher in Lebanon and work with data on the association of waterpipe smoking and nonmedical use of prescription drugs among adolescents, which I ended up using for my thesis. The close mentorship and support I received during my practicum and thesis allowed me to apply the skills I learned throughout my courses at Mailman, reinforcing my interest to use research to inform policy.

“Columbia has given me the opportunity to work closely with inspiring and experienced professors, in New York City and globally, who have guided and trained me throughout my graduate experience.”
Samantha Schilsky, MPH 2015

For my practicum I was fortunate enough to work abroad for the Ministry of Health and Quality of Life in Port Louis Mauritius for my practicum. My work in Mauritius included enhancement of the current nutritional screening program for primary and secondary students. Additionally, I worked on an analysis and paper titled, Prevalence of behavioural risk factors for cardiovascular disease in adolescents in low-income and middle-income countries: an individual participant data meta-analysis, which was published in the Lancet this past spring. For my thesis I worked on assessing the relationship between dietary choline intake and The Relationship Between Dietary Choline Intake and Death form Cardiovascular Disease Among Arsenic-Exposed Bangladeshi Individuals.

Sophia Li, MPH 2014

Throughout my graduate studies, I engaged in clinical research at the Center for Behavioral Cardiovascular Health at Columbia University Medical Center with the Measuring Adherence to Control Hypertension (MATCH) team. My research experience culminated with my master’s thesis, in which I used MATCH trial data to examine the relationship between simple measures of cognitive function and adherence to antihypertensive medications. I also spent a year as an intern in the clinical research department at Pfizer Consumer Healthcare. I was involved in a diverse array of tasks including developing and reviewing clinical trial protocols, compiling safety and efficacy outcomes from trials, and developing crucial components of a risk management plan for OTC pharmaceutical drugs. I have now joined Becton Dickinson full time in the Center of Excellence as a health economics and outcomes research fellow, where I frequently draw on my epidemiology and comparative effectiveness research coursework.

“I was involved in a diverse array of tasks including developing and reviewing clinical trial protocols, compiling safety and efficacy outcomes from trials, and developing crucial components of a risk management plan for OTC pharmaceutical drugs.”
**Chris Tait, MPH 2014**

Coming into Mailman, I was very new to the field of public health—but eager to learn. After progressing through the first iteration of the core curriculum, I was exposed to the ambit of public health, but more importantly, I began to hone my specific research interests. This continued into the second semester where I began to take more department specific classes. I then embarked on a practicum in Mauritius, conducting research in chronic disease epidemiology. I saw that after one year of coursework, I had come a long way, but there was still much more to learn.

I returned to Mailman after a summer abroad and began to complement my classroom learning with other experiences at Mailman, which gave me a much deeper appreciation for the field I have grown to love. Notably, I had the pleasure of serving as a teaching assistant for four classes throughout my second year, including introductory quantitative classes and a class on the application of epidemiological research methods using SAS. I also served as a Communicating Health and Epidemiology Fellow or “CHEF” for the Department of Epidemiology’s translational website, the 2x2project. This fellowship combined didactic training with formal work experience to translate emerging public health science to both educated and lay audiences. Additionally, I took on a formal work position as the data manager for a large epidemiological study conducted by Mailman faculty, which gave me a realistic sense of how theory is transformed into practice, and some of the barriers to research not often highlighted in my coursework.

All in all, I attribute these varied experiences during my two years as an MPH student with providing a comprehensive background in the field of public health and specifically within epidemiology, such that I feel extremely confident as I continue my training towards a PhD in epidemiology after graduating from Columbia.

**Teress Votto, MPH 2015**

I am a graduating student in the Epidemiology Department with a certificate in Public Health Informatics. Before joining the Mailman community, I worked as a Project Manager for the HIV vaccine clinical trials program at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, MA. I completed my practicum last summer on biomarkers of oxidative stress in ALS patients under the Department of Epidemiology’s Dr. Pam Factor-Litvak. After ending her practicum, I have continued working with Dr. Factor-Litvak on additional ALS research studies and on my epidemiology master’s thesis on phthalate exposures in pregnant women and reproductive health measures in newborns. Since June 2014 I have also worked with ICAP as a bioinformatics analyst, primarily working with DHIS – an open source software platform for reporting, analyzing and disseminating data for TB and HIV health programs in Africa. In August 2015, I will begin a new position as a Sr. Consultant for IBM, where I will work primarily on health outcomes research projects.

“After progressing through the first iteration of the core curriculum, I was exposed to the ambit of public health, but more importantly, I began to hone my specific research interests.”
Ginger Golub, MPH 2014

During my first year of my MPH, I worked as a contractor for a community health and disease prevention non-profit called Public Health Solutions, on their “Be the Generation Bridge” project. I was involved in implementing social media campaigns to increase community awareness about pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV (PrEP) and HIV vaccine trials.

This gave me the opportunity to design informational fliers and execute recruitment activities targeting key populations including transgender women and men who have sex with men. For my global health practicum, I worked on a pilot program with ICAP in rural Kenya which integrated cardiovascular risk screening into HIV care and treatment. Working in the field, I assisted in the programmatic implementation by creating algorithms, flip charts, and guidelines to standardize procedures and assist healthcare workers. I performed data quality assurance for the electronic surveillance system and presented our data to stakeholders in forums and meetings to bolster support for the program. Over this time, the health center finished screening about 1,200 active HIV patients and the program expanded to five more facilities. It was an incredible experience for me to witness the nascent stages of the program all the way to its effective implementation and scale-up.

"It was an incredible experience for me to witness the nascent stages of the program all the way to its effective implementation and scale-up."