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What to Think About When Thinking About a PhD

By Leann Marcinek, MPH Student & VP of the MPH Student Advisory Board

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Have you ever considered obtaining a PhD? Do you have curiosity, passion and drive to become a creative thinker and leader in public health? Do you crave freedom and flexibility in your career, to be the person who dreams up the solutions to the health problems of the world? Then perhaps, pursuing a PhD is the path for you. Although pursuits in the field of public health are varied and it can be difficult to choose just one, the process to a PhD remains consistent. If this is on your list of goals, then now is the time to start planning. Here are some tips on how to obtain a PhD from former WCU MPH students who are currently enrolled in a PhD program and a panel of WCU professors, including Dr. Stacie Metz, from the recent jointly sponsored Graduate Student Association and MPH Student Advisory Board (SAB)'s *How to Obtain a PhD* event.

There is a lot to think about when you ponder the option of a PhD. This includes everything from studying for and taking the GRE, what program/what school/what dissertation topic, how to apply for scholarships/assistantships/fellowships. This all takes place before applying and takes a great deal of time to plan. As you delve into your PhD options, take notes of the different dates associated with these tasks because hitting or missing a deadline can accelerate or hinder your success of getting into school. Without clearly sorting through these items, you cannot move forward in the process. For some, this is the most difficult part of the application process. Lindsay Himes, current Public Health – Health Policy PhD candidate at Temple University said her math skills were so out of practice that the GRE preparation was difficult. Bonnie McIntosh, Health Care and Epidemiology PhD candidate at University of British Columbia said this step required “meticulous attention to details” which she found to be the most difficult part of the application process when considering applying to multiple schools.

As you settle on a program of interest and get back your GRE scores you can now assess what schools might be right for you. At this point, you want to network, network, network to get to know the brains in your field before applying! All of the WCU professors on the PhD panel at the GSA/MPH SAB event could not stress this enough. Find the leaders in your desired field, make connections, talk with past students, seek an advisor and talk with past advisees of this advisor. Leave no stone unturned. Your chances of acceptance increase with the more people you know and the better you can articulate knowledge in your research field. Since the PhD is research intensive, you need to provide evidence that you are up to the challenge of learning research methodology, critically understanding the field, and knowing who are the experts in the field. The WCU MPH program is skill-based, and Adam Awolu, currently pursuing a PhD in Public Health Education and Promotion at Walden University said, “the vigorous hands-on training at West Chester University” made things a bit easier for him. Lindsay added “Your creativity in connecting your past network from professional and academic experiences to your future goals can set you apart and will increase your chances of acceptance to your top program of choice.” When you are networking, do not forget to name drop and upsell your experience for an additional competitive edge.

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Ph.D (Continued from pg. 1)

Once a successful network is obtained, it is now time to apply. Adam explored the distance education option and decided this was the best route for him. He found the application process to be more hectic due to the prospect of both campus and online schools, but relied on a strong goal statement and genuine interest in his field. While Lindsay said the applications were all pretty similar, Bonnie suggested emphasis in following areas: leadership potential, ability to plan, implement, analyze your research/data and disseminate your findings, ability to work well with others, ability to seek and gain opportunities in your field, and community involvement. It is like applying for a job - sell every attribute you have to offer. If there is an area where you do not quite meet the qualifications, this is your chance to explain yourself and offer up how you plan to fill that void. This includes past qualifying experiences or your plan to fill the void with your hard work, dedication and knowledge. Just like applying for jobs, Lindsay reminds you to know the faculty and know the program when applying. Tailor your academic and professional development goals in your essays and interview responses to the strengths of the different programs. Each school and program is unique, and you need to prove that you are the perfect candidate for that program.

These first steps can take a year or more to complete. But once you have been accepted to a PhD program, you will have some time to sit back and relax before your program begins.

Then reality will hit. Obtaining a PhD is an amazing accomplishment, and like all major accomplishments it comes with a set of challenges. It is a long haul to completing your program. Before beginning you need to seek the support from family and friends, and let them know that you are dedicating yourself to this goal and that is your first priority. You may lose friends and loves along the way, but honoring your personal goal is the key to success. Programs can take anywhere from 2-10 years, but on average span 4-6. This may sound incredibly long, but the entire WCU PhD panel agreed that it was one of the best times of their lives and would not trade the experience. Bonnie's greatest challenge in the program so far has been figuring out how to make a meaningful contribution to the field via her research question. Lindsay agreed, saying "this seems to be a common concern among [herself and] other students at different points in the program." This common theme may seem insurmountable, but it is important to remember that many before have overcome this obstacle and have presented cohesive and passionate dissertations. For Adam, his greatest challenge has been learning to accept the word "no", explaining, "people may have different views of what you want to do and that is okay to help you rethink and reorganize your thoughts, or even strengthen your position in a flexible way."

You will know that you are ready to begin this process when you have the support of family, colleagues, and a wealth of encouragement. Your academic and research interests must be solid. A strong desire to study, research, ask questions, and find answers is absolutely necessary for this career move. A question was asked at the GSA/MPH SAB PhD event, "If I don't have a desire to research, should I pursue a PhD." The honest answer was "no". A PhD is not for everyone. Think this option through thoroughly before getting too far in the process to avoid failure. Truly committing to pursuing a PhD very well may lead to one of your greatest achievements. Adam offers a word of inspiration from Nelson Mandela, '*Your time is ripe and so do what you can. Everything looks/sounds impossible until it is done.*'

MPH Nutrition Track Students Participate in Vive tu Vida-Kennett Square

On Saturday, October 1, Drs. Mary Beth Gilboy and Christine Karpinski along with nine students, eight in the Masters in Public Health Program and one in the undergraduate Nutrition and Dietetics Program, participated in *Vive tu Vida*, the nation's premier annual Hispanic family health and physical activity event. The event took place in Anson B. Nixon Park, located in Kennett Square. *Vive tu Vida* was presented by the National Alliance for Hispanic Health. The slogan for the event is "Get Up! Get Moving!" and is targeted at the Hispanic community at large. The goal of the event is to encourage families to become more physically active and to encourage healthy eating and a healthy lifestyle.

Students and faculty from the MPH Program Nutrition Track, West Chester University participated in the event.. The display consisted of three tables where families could come and gather valuable health and nutrition information.

Overall, the fair was a huge success. The MPH Nutrition Track was proud to have been afforded the opportunity to participate in *Vive tu Vida* and looks forward to participating again at next year's event.



MPH Nutrition Track Graduates First Students

On August 24, 2011, Rebecca Giunta DelRossi, RD and Emily Smith presented their Applied Learning Experience (ALE) posters to faculty and students at the MPH poster session. Rebecca and Emily are the first graduates of the MPH Nutrition Track. Ms. Smith's ALE Project was a community needs assessment titled "Nutrition Environment Assessment and Healthy Eating Recommendations for a Mexican American Community in Pennsylvania". This project was done under the direction of her site supervisor, Ms. Joan Holliday, Public Health Nurse, of the Chester County Health Department and her faculty supervisor, Dr. Mary Beth Gilboy. Emily presented her findings to ACTIVATE Kennett Square and the Kennett Square Council. She also presented a poster of her ALE Project at the Pennsylvania Public Health Association's annual meeting on September 27, 2011. Ms. DelRossi's ALE project, entitled "An Evaluation of a Complete Meal Replacement Program", was completed at the Preventive Medicine and Rehabilitation Institute (PMRI) of Christiana Care Health Systems in Wilmington, DE. For her project, she compared outcome measures (weight and blood pressure) between two community weight loss programs; a meal replacement program (OPTIFAST) and a Registered Dietitian (RD)-led, lifestyle management program ("Fit4Life").

After graduation, Rebecca began working as an RD for Medifast Weight Control Centers, a meal replacement weight loss program. "My ALE experience at PMRI greatly prepared me for my current position. My topic and work with the OPTIFAST program specifically provided me the opportunity to expand my background knowledge regarding meal replacements for weight loss. This allowed me to be better prepared for my new position by having a greater understanding of the field."

Dr. Bill's 2012 Summer MPH Courses

Dr. Bill will be teaching the following courses in the summer of 2012:

HEA632 (20) Social & Behavioral Aspects of Health

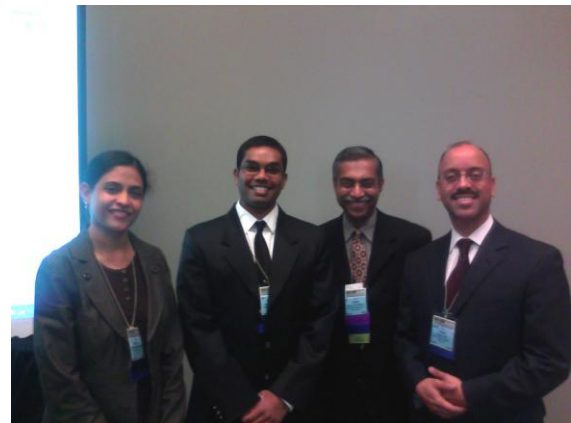
HEA543 (20) Transcultural Health

HEA435/581 (31) Special Topics: Health Counseling and Health Promotion*

*July 18, 19, 23, 24, 25 (W, Th, Fri, Mon, Tue); 9am-5pm. Provides students with an overview of the theory & practice of health counseling in health promotion programs and settings, with specific applications to common health problems. The theoretical framework for the practice of health promotion health counseling is based on Ivey's Microskills model, a psycho-educational approach which breaks counseling into discrete skills that can be mastered and applied easily. "How to facilitate small groups" in a public health setting will be explored, as well as the structure and function of small group work. If you plan on working with individuals and/or groups in health promotion practice-this course is for you.

139th Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association Presentation

Dr. Gopal Sankaran and Delgado, David presented at the 139th Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association in Washington, D.C. on November 1, 2011.



Pictured left to right:

Dr. Monika Sawhney, Mercer University, GA; Dr. Dhanush Kiran Mekala, MPH, HCM (Certificate), WCU, PA; Dr. Gopal Sankaran, WCU, PA; and Dr. David Delgado, WCU, PA

MPH-Environmental Health Program-What's In It For You?

By Leann Marcinek, Graduate Assistant for Environmental Health

Environmental Health has been, in one way or another, part of West Chester University's curriculum since the 1970s. The Environmental Health Program at West Chester University prepares talented students for the technical and professional demands of careers dedicated to the protection of human health and the environment: including rights to a safe home and work place, clean water supplies for human consumption, recreation and wildlife, safe and available food supply, waste and energy management, and careful resource management for the future.

Interested students at the undergraduate level can earn the B.S. degree or a minor in Environmental Health; at the graduate level students can earn a master of public health (MPH) with a track emphasis in Environmental Health or an Emergency Preparedness graduate certificate. The MPH-Environmental Health program has been in place since 2000, replacing the earlier M.S. degree in Environmental Health. This degree prepares students for jobs in environmental scientist and industrial hygiene by offering courses in environmental regulations, risk assessment, industrial hygiene, toxicology, GIS, water quality, epidemiology, emergency preparedness, and bioterrorism/biocrisises. The MPH-EH program currently has students with diverse backgrounds and interests including military veterans, clinical laboratory experience, environmental consulting and industrial hygiene.

The program has great value, as students choose to pursue it for WCU's convenient location, affordable pricing, continual outstanding reputation, knowledgeable professors, and, most importantly, for the opportunity to fulfill a passion. Bret Robinson, a current MPH student and infantryman, began his Master's study after being deployed to Iraq. While overseas, Robinson found "that the water was heavily polluted from runoff of all the towns and agriculture in the area. Anyone with a nose could tell you that there was something wrong with their water supply. When I came home I found myself thinking about this a lot. I also found myself pondering career change." He enrolled in the MPH-Environmental Health program with the hopes of obtaining a career in environmental risk assessment, and potentially continuing his education for a PhD in Environmental Health.

There may be challenges along the way to obtaining an MPH; juggling life, work, and school is not easy. Joy Dvornicich, an alumnus of the MPH-EH program who worked as a lab technician for the CDC and DHS, said the hardest part of the program "had nothing to do with the program itself. I was working full-time in charge of the bioagent detection laboratory and I had many responsibilities." Luckily the 45 credit program offers a variety of options to make completion practical and doable, such as accelerated courses (7 week, opposed to 14), and summer, winter, day and evening courses expedite up the process. Flexibility in scheduling also makes the degree achievable where students can take between one and five courses per semester, or take a leave of absence if an unexpected life situation occurs.

Not only does the program help students accomplish their goals, but there are many ways to become involved to better the program, school, and even yourself. Jennifer Whittaker, new to the program this year, in addition to working to advance her career to a management level with 1Source Safety and Health, Inc., is excited to explore ways to get involved with the MPH community. She is already involved in Graduate Studies Association (GSA), and has an interest in the MPH Student Advisory Board. Jennifer is also seeking opportunities to recruit and bring attention to Environmental Health at WCU, further demonstrating a student body commitment to the program's success.

The MPH-Environmental Health program is great for someone who cares strongly about the environment and the communities affected by poor or damaged environmental conditions. The work is about being innovative to create real change where there are environmental problems that can impact human health, as well as direct involvement in securing a safe and healthful environment for future generations. You can be a part of this exciting and rewarding career track.

→For more information about the MPH-Environmental Health program contact Dr. Shorten, Professor and Director of Environmental Health Programs, at cshorten@wcupa.edu or 610-436-2360.

MPH Featured Alumni

The Master of Public Health (MPH) program at West Chester University (WCU) opened a whole host of new opportunities for me to work in the communities that I care about and to improve access to health education and services for people within those communities, so that they can be empowered to lead fuller and healthier lives. After being accepted to the Community Health Track and upon taking my first class at WCU, I knew that I had found a “home” in which I could grow as a student and emerging professional, enhance my learning, and develop my skills in the field of public health, while building invaluable relationships with mentors, faculty, and colleagues. In addition, I initially encountered what would turn out to be an inspiring and ongoing dialogue throughout the MPH program about the practice of ethics within the field.



REMINDER

Students are strongly encouraged to submit news, views, and experiences for publication in the M.P.H. Connections. Please contact The Health Department (health@wcupa.edu)

While studying at West Chester, I was continuously impressed with how deeply all of the faculty members within the university’s Department of Health were invested in our success as students and future members of the public health workforce. This was evident through their dedication to teaching core competencies and standards, preparing us for professional credentialing such as the Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) exam, and creating and sharing many opportunities for students to participate in research and other professional development activities. The emphasis on collaboration and providing culturally competent public health services through a community health lens was also heavily focused upon in many of the program’s learning components. While completing my MPH, I was fortunate to have been exposed to new community health challenges and opportunities through hands-on learning and group-based work, including within the Program Planning, Transcultural Health, Program Administration, Applied Learning Experience I and II, Program Evaluation, and Research Methods courses.

WCU in its entirety comprises a vast learning environment, in which students in the MPH program are encouraged to take advantage of opportunities for professional development in many of the other departments and agencies on and off-campus. Since graduating in August of 2010, I have successfully passed the CHES exam and I currently work as a public health professional and Health Educator at Princeton University, where I serve with a comprehensive team to design, implement, and evaluate health promotion programs for students, faculty, and staff members. I am also responsible for managing the peer health advisor program, in which I supervise over eighty student volunteers who provide campus support to their fellow undergraduate students. In the future, I plan to build upon the training and education I received in the MPH program and continue my public health studies at the doctoral level.

I firmly believe that the training and preparation I received as a student at West Chester has played an instrumental role in helping me to begin and develop my career in the public health field, and I continue to reflect on my past experiences and learning there in order to inform my decision-making every day and to practice the highest level of ethical leadership. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the faculty who provided mentorship and support in a challenging and engaging learning environment, to the colleagues and fellow students who turned into friends, and to all of the members of the WCU community who contributed to my overwhelmingly positive experience as a student in the MPH program.

Emily J. Kronenberger, MS, MPH, CHES, WCU Class of 2010
Contact: emilykronenberger@gmail.com

Faculty/Student Scholarship and Presentations & Faculty News

McCown, Donald and Chris Moriconi (Nursing Department) are presenting at “Critical Theories in the 21st Century: A Conference of Transformative Pedagogies”, Friday, November 18-Saturday, November 19, 2011 at WCU. The presentation is called “Meditators on the barricades? Exploring three dimensions of mindfulness for activists.”

McCown, Donald had a presentation accepted into *Investigating and Integrating Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society* 10th Annual International Scientific Conference for Clinicians, Researchers and Educators, March 28-April 1, 2012, sponsored by the Center for Mindfulness at UMASS Medical School. Professor McCown’s presentation is titled “Exploring the Ethical Space of the Mindfulness-Based Interventions.”

Sheehan, Maura presented "The Size Segregating Characteristics of Two Prototype Cyclones Used to Sample Diesel Particulate Matter and Coal Dust" at the annual national conference on October 5, 2011 of the American Association for Aerosol Research in Orlando, FL. Her co-authors were Dr. Emanuele Cauda and Jon Volkwein from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Robert Gussman from BGI Inc. and Dr. Lee Kenny from the British Health and Safety Executive.

Invited External Reviewer

Sankaran, G. (2011). External Reviewer of portfolio of a faculty member for promotion to the rank of Full Professor in the Department of Counseling and School Psychology at University of Massachusetts Boston in October.

Invited Presentations (non-peer reviewed)

Sankaran, G. (2011). *Conducting Evaluation and Research Related to Health Education*. Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) Test Preparation Workshop at Saint Joseph’s University, Philadelphia on October 8.

Sankaran, G. (2011). *Assessing Individual and Community Needs for Health Education*. Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) Test Preparation Workshop at Saint Joseph’s University, Philadelphia on October 8.

Invited Session Organizer and Moderator

Sankaran, G. (2011). Organized and moderated a panel on *Immigrant Health Status and Access to Care* at the 139th Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association in Washington, D.C. on November 1.

Presentation at a National Conference (peer reviewed)

Sankaran, G. (2011). *Immigrant Health Status: Healthcare issues for the twenty-first century*. Oral presentation at the 139th Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association at Washington, D.C. on November 1.

Sankaran, G. (2011). *Health Issues of Immigrants: Implications for urban health*. Oral presentation at 139th Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association at Washington, D.C. on October 31.

Scholarly publication (Non peer-reviewed)

Nanda, V., & Sankaran, G. (2011). *Differences in knowledge, attitudes and behaviors regarding oral health among graduate students of the United States and India*. Final Report submitted to the Dean, College of Health Sciences, West Chester University in fulfillment of 2010 Student-Faculty Research Program Grant requirements in October.

Leadership/Community Service

Sankaran, G. (2011). Member, Science Fair Committee, Collegium Charter School, Exton, Pennsylvania.

Sankaran, G. (2011). Member, Community Advisory Board, WHYY (a PBS affiliate), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Sankaran, G. (2011). Board Member, Cerebral Palsy Association of Chester County/Chester County Disability Services, Exton, Pennsylvania.

Leadership/Professional Service

Sankaran, G. (2011). Elected Governing Councilor, American Public Health Association, representing the International Health Section. Participated in the Governing Council meetings at the Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association in Washington, D. C. on October 29 and November 1.

Sankaran, G. (2011). Chair, Global Health Connections Committee, International Health Section, American Public Health Association. Organized and conducted the Business Meeting of the GHCC at the American Public Health Association Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. on October 30. Also, organized and arranged for staffing the Welcome Booth for International Attendees at the Annual Meeting (October 29 – November 2).

Presentation at an International Conference (peer reviewed)

Nanda, V.,* & Sankaran, G. (2011). *Differences in knowledge, attitudes and behaviors regarding oral health among graduate students of the United States and India*. Poster presented at the FDI Annual World Dental Congress in Mexico City, Mexico (September 14-17).

(* Vani Nanda is a current student in the MPH Program—Community Health track; This project was supported by the College of Health Sciences 2010 Student-Faculty Research Program Grant awarded to Drs. Vani Nanda and Gopal Sankaran.)