

Jason Orr, MPH

MPH Emphasis: Infectious Diseases and Zoonoses (Aug 2014)

MPH Applied Practice Experience: For his MPH project, Jason worked on a project at Riley County Health Department (RCHD) that utilized some of his Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) experience and was informed by a recent local public health system assessment. The Riley County system assessment, though acknowledging strengths in disease identification, epidemiology and investigation, identified weaknesses in preparedness across sectors of the community. The resultant field experience report, “Public Health Preparedness for Pandemic Influenza in Riley County, Kansas,” summarized observations from local partners and provided descriptions of Riley County’s susceptibility to medical surge, public health response capabilities and recommendations for improvement planning.



Current Position: Analyst at the Kansas Health Institute in Topeka, Kansas

Shortly after graduation, Jason was hired as an Analyst at the Kansas Health Institute (KHI) in Topeka, Kansas. KHI supports effective policymaking through nonpartisan research, education and engagement with staff from diverse disciplines across health, medicine and public policy. His work in Kansas has included engagement with the Kansas public health system in efforts to modernize the public health system, facilitation of community planning processes and project support for dozens of projects delivering in-depth information and insights for Kansas policymaking. He has also coordinated projects for KHI’s Center for Sharing Public Health Services (the Center), which provides access to tools, techniques and expertise that support better collaboration and sharing of services and resources across boundaries. The Center serves a national audience of public health practitioners and policymakers to help public health departments across the country protect and promote the health of the public.

First Job After Graduation: Upon starting the MPH program at K-State, Jason was fortunate to begin his public health career at the RCHD as the PHEP Coordinator. Working within the public health industry while moving through the MPH program was a valuable experience – practical experiences in public health during coursework is recommended to immerse students in the discipline.

Tips and Advice – MPH Applied Practice Experience

1. **Know the field and know yourself.** There are a multitude of partners within the public health system. The MPH program requires students work within a non-academic public health practice organization. Every geopolitical jurisdiction across the nation is served by a local or state government health department. Consider reaching out to the state's association of local health officials (SACCHO) for placement. Governmental public health is the most visible but public health extends across disciplines and public and private sectors – consider searching for persons who work within non-traditional organizations that have public health training (MPH, DrPH, etc.) or strong public-health related experience. Overall, know the type of place that you would enjoy spending approximately four-to-six weeks of your life learning and working.
2. **Design your APE and benefits to the preceptor.** Some public health organizations face unique challenges, but most face common challenges related to impact of their services. Common challenges may fall into two buckets: efficiency (e.g., staff time, costs, revenues) and effectiveness (e.g., efficacy of a specific service/intervention, reach of services, quality of services). When searching for your APE, consider drafting a brief proposal for a project that interests you and describes 1) a specific problem to be solved, 2) purpose for your project and significance to your preceptor, 3) a simple approach to understand or solve the problem, and 4) your anticipated outcome and products from your work. Ensure your project is attainable within a realistic timeline and consider personalizing the proposal with specific problems or outcomes you perceive may resonate with the preceptor. **Bonus:** *The proposal may serve as a concept for your capstone thesis or report.*

Tips and Advice – Employment

1. **Research the field and what jobs people have.** You will be surprised at the many different directions MPH graduates go following graduation. In a health-focused nation, there are boundless opportunities. While disciplines of epidemiology and toxicology have job descriptions that are uniform across the world, positions with titles such as “program specialist”, “consultant” and “analyst” may vary greatly. Take the time to understand those opportunities and the duties they entail, using this information to help you search for the jobs you are most interested in (and most likely to succeed). At the entry-level, however, you may not know what your future career will look like. Be open to embracing uncertainty and use your first job(s) as an opportunity to learn what work resonates best with your skills and experience.
2. **Start early and be patient.** The present job market and application processes foster a system in which employers may often be inundated with applicants – both qualified and unqualified for a position. This takes a bit of time to sort through, typically after the position offering has closed. Finally, the application and interview processes may be very lengthy with weeks before a first response and more weeks for interviews and final decision.

3. **Organize your materials and have options.** Most employers require fairly standard application materials: resume, cover letter, transcript, writing sample, etc. A pro tip is to be prepared to have your application personalized to the employer and job offering. Save your future self the time and prepare “master” documents that include different elements to select depending upon your needs. For example, start a master resume that includes all relevant employment, courses, publications, awards, etc. When the time comes, save that master file as its own resume and trim out all but the most relevant information. The same goes for cover letters and having multiple writing samples. Keep different folders for each material and track versions; filenames that include type of document, employer or position name, and date will help you keep track of what you have used in the past.
4. **Prepare your proposal and prepare yourself.** Recruitment often favors candidates who are prepared to respond to position offerings and describe their fit for the job in a succinct manner. Your cover letter is your proposal which, in one-to-two pages, explains why you are the best candidate for the job. Careful review of the position and organization prior to writing a cover letter is important as contemporary electronic application systems may filter out applicants not incorporating pre-determined terminology. Consider specific tools, skills and other words from the position offering and evidence your fit by using those words in your cover letter and resume – if you can deliver on your word. The early bird may get the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.
5. **Leverage your strengths and be honest with your weaknesses.** Be prepared to discuss both your top achievements as well as shortcomings. While the former may be easy to evidence or explain the latter is what we look to avoid. A beneficial way to handle this is to reflect on how a challenge became a learning experience, especially if you can pivot the experience into a strength. People tend to learn most after failure and thoughtful human resource professionals will respect your determination. Additionally, though your MPH program is largely academic, spend additional time on personal and professional development. Every employer is a business and all businesses follow business processes. Even the top epidemiologists may become stymied when asked to estimate other direct costs (ODCs) and indirect costs (IDCs) of a project.