Department of Health Behavior

Practicum FAQs for Potential Preceptors

This document provides an overview of the Department of Health Behavior’s (HB) practicum requirement for its Master of Public Health (MPH) students. It answers the most commonly asked questions about the practicum experience and gives prospective preceptors an idea of the expectations associated with their role. Should you require additional information, please feel free to contact the HB MPH program manager, Meg Landfried at landfried@unc.edu.

What is a practicum?
A practicum is an individualized, mentored, experiential learning opportunity that serves as a bridge between a student’s academic training and applied public health practice. It is required of all students in accredited schools of public health. The practicum offers students an opportunity to:
- Contribute to the work and impact of a public health-related organization;
- Explore areas of professional interest, network, and develop career goals;
- Apply knowledge and skills learned in the classroom;
- Observe and learn from professionals in the field; and
- Gain feedback on professional skills and abilities.

HB MPH students must complete a minimum of 240 practicum hours (equivalent to six weeks of full-time work) over the summer between the first and second years of the HB MPH program. Practica can occur anywhere, including both domestic and international settings, and can be paid or unpaid. During the practicum, an appointed on-site preceptor directly supervises the student. The MPH program manager and the student’s academic adviser contribute additional support and expertise to the experience.

What are the practicum requirements?
Practicum opportunities must:
1. Be at least 240 hours long.
2. Be mentored by a practicing public health professional (preceptor) who is working within a public health-related institution, private agency, or organization. The preceptor must have an MPH or another advanced public health degree, have at least five years of public health working experience, be willing and able to spend regularly scheduled time with the student, and provide regular guidance and feedback to the student.
3. Require students to apply graduate level skills acquired in the HB MPH program.
4. Involve projects that allow students to have principal responsibility for products that are of value to an organization. The number and types of projects a student completes are left to the discretion of the preceptor in recognition of the agency’s needs, time constraints, and student interests and capabilities.
5. Provide students with opportunities to gain a wide perspective about the types of issues, concerns, and processes that occur in real world public health practice and research.
6. Develop and enhance students’ professional skill sets.

What knowledge and skills do students bring to the practicum?
By the end of the first year of the HB MPH program, students have completed core coursework in: health behavior theory; biostatistics; qualitative and quantitative research methods; and program planning, as well as elective coursework.
What is the practicum process?
The planning, implementation, and evaluation of the practicum is a collaborative effort between the student, the student’s academic adviser, the MPH program manager, and the practicum preceptor. Students are expected to take initiative in identifying and arranging a meaningful practicum placement, with assistance from the MPH program manager. Throughout the fall, academic advisers and the MPH program manager meet with individual students to help them refine career and professional interests, develop practicum objectives, and identify potential practicum sites and contacts.

We expect students to match with a practicum and identify a preceptor by mid-April. Once a student finds a practicum placement, (s)he works with his/her preceptor, his/her academic adviser, and the MPH program manager to develop a learning agreement. The learning agreement serves as a proposal for the project and outlines the work to be undertaken. The learning agreement must be completed, reviewed, and signed by all parties before the start of the practicum and is revisited throughout the practicum experience. Students and preceptors submit evaluations of the practicum experience at its completion. The practicum culminates with HB Practicum Day, an annual event held in the fall during which students share the results and lessons learned from their practica. Practicum agencies and preceptors are invited to attend this event.

What do students do during their practica?
Practicum activities and outputs vary in accordance with the practicum agency’s needs and the student’s interests and learning objectives. Examples of practicum activities include:

- Coding or recoding data
- Conducting a literature review
- Curriculum development
- Data analysis
- Database management
- Development of social marketing materials
- Evaluation (planning, instrument development, reporting)
- Formative research (interviews, focus groups, surveys)
- Grant writing
- Implementation of a health intervention
- IRB application development, submission, and/or renewal
- Program planning
- Qualitative data collection
- Quantitative data collection
- Questionnaire/survey design
- Report writing

What types of activities are NOT appropriate for HB practicum students?
We expect students get a mentored experience. A practicum that is a “shadow” experience or is strictly observational would not be appropriate. Students are not expected to replace administrative staff (e.g., only asked to do copying or filing).

What are the roles and responsibilities of the practicum preceptor?
The preceptor has the professional skills and knowledge to direct the on-site experience of the student. (S)he is expected to have: an advanced public health degree; an interest and competence in supervising and mentoring; expertise in assigned project areas; experience and status within the organization; and an ability to serve as the key link between the student and the agency and between the student and the community (if applicable). The preceptor:

- Assists in the development of learning objectives for the practicum;
- Develops a realistic project scope and timetable with the student;
- Approves the learning agreement;
- Orient the student to sponsor agency people, projects, and resources;
- Provides resources needed to complete the project(s);
- Meets regularly with the student to provide him/her with support, guidance, and feedback;
- Communicates with the MPH program manager (and academic adviser as needed) to provide feedback and monitor student progress; and
- Completes an evaluation of the student and the practicum experience.
Should my agency provide compensation for the student’s work?
A practicum agency should provide resources and/or material assistance to the extent that this is possible. While compensation is not required, many HB students choose paid practica, especially because they have to pay for the academic credit associated with the practicum. In-state students pay approximately $300 for their practicum credit. Out-of-state students pay approximately $900 for their practicum credits. Compensation for the practicum varies significantly by the type of organization, project, and location. Students can be compensated at an hourly rate ($15/hour average) or by stipend ($3,600 average).

What type of workspace does a student need?
Students need the space and materials necessary for them to be successful in completing their assigned project(s). In most cases, this includes a desk, computer access, internet access, a phone, and basic office supplies.

How do I request a student to work with my agency on his/her practicum?
If you are interested in hosting a student for his/her practicum, please send a description of your practicum opportunity to Meg Landfried, MPH program manager, at landfried@unc.edu by April 1, 2015. At a minimum, please provide the following information in your correspondence:

- **Practicum Agency Contact Information**: Address, website, and phone number for your organization.
- **Practicum Description**: An overview of the major activities associated with the practicum.
- **Final Deliverable(s)**: The products that will result from the student’s work (e.g., curriculum, manuscript, evaluation report, database, etc.).
- **Skills Required**: Skills that students must already have before completing the practicum (e.g., computer skills, language skills, experience with a specific task, knowledge of a particular health topic, etc.).
- **Timeframe**: When the student will be expected to complete the work.
- **Funding**: Amount of funding (hourly wage or stipend) available, if applicable.
- **Application Instructions**: Steps that should be taken to learn more about, or apply to, the opportunity.

The MPH program manager will review your opportunity for feasibility and appropriateness. If it meets HB’s practicum requirements, it will be emailed out to all first year HB MPH students. It will also be posted on an internal website for record keeping purposes. An example practicum opportunity description is provided in Appendix A.

What is the timeline for offering a practicum opportunity and selecting a practicum student?
We recommend following the timeline below to attract the best candidates for your position:

- October-February: Send Meg your opportunity
- February: Application deadline
- February-April: Application review and interviews; offers
- April: Develop learning agreement
- May: Practicum experience begins

*Thank you for your interest in the HB MPH practicum program. We appreciate all that you do to provide great practicum opportunities for our students!*
Appendix A

Sample Practicum Solicitation

The Injury and Violence Prevention Branch at the NC Division of Public Health (5605 Six Forks Rd. Raleigh, NC 27609; http://www.ncpublichealth.com/chronicdiseaseandinjury/; 919-707-5000) seeks a HB MPH student to develop a Department-wide accident and injury database accessible by all division/Facility/School program administrators through a web-based application. This database will streamline and standardize the 17,000 employee accident and injury data now collected manually for the Department of Health and Human Services. The major tasks involved in this practicum will be to: design the accident/injury database, develop web-based application for Department-wide access, and develop training modules for user training. The final product will be a web-accessible accident and injury database which program administrators throughout the state can access and input required reporting information. This is a six week practicum. A $3,500 stipend will be provided.

Potential applicants should provide:

- A cover letter
- A current resume (listing applicable work and educational experiences)
- A 3-5 page writing sample
- The names and contact information for 3 references

For more information and to apply to this opportunity, please contact:

Jane Doe, MPH  
Head, Injury Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit  
Injury and Violence Prevention Branch  
Chronic Disease and Injury Section  
NC Division of Public Health  
919-707-XXX  
Jane.Doe@dhhs.nc.gov