Health Services Management & Community Development (HSMCD)
Alumni Career Profiles

Whether you are a first year student exploring career and major options or an alumnus who is thinking about a job change, alumni career profiles provide opportunities to learn about a professional’s career path and decision-making process. Alumni career profiles are provided for students exploring degree options or alumni who are considering a job transition to learn more about the career paths taken by our program graduates. The profiles provide a glimpse of the wide range of careers available to Health Services Management and Community Development Professionals.

Alumni Career Snapshot

- Jena Chacko, Class of 2006
- Outreach Coordinator/Health Educator, Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE)
- Wichita, Kansas

Why did you choose to major in HSMCD? If you were starting out again, what would you do differently?
I originally chose WSU to pursue a degree in dental hygiene. I wasn’t completely sure of my decision, but thought I’d see where college took me. I love helping and working with people, and knew I wanted to be in Health Professions. The first semester of my freshman year in college I enrolled in a class called Health Professions (HP) 101. The course provided an overview of the different degrees that the College of Health Professions at WSU offers. It was through this class that I heard about the HSMCD program for the first time. After hearing about the degree, I knew that it was what I was meant to do. I began my coursework in HSMCD the following semester and never looked back. The Community Development aspect of the degree is really what pulled my heart in the direction of pursuing a degree in HSMCD.

“I learned that it is very important to take any practicum experience seriously. I dedicated myself to my practicum, and it paid off with a job. I also learned that every practicum, good or bad, is valuable. Some people did not enjoy their practicum experience, but it led them in a different direction and helped them to identify what their true passion is.”

Describe your career path since graduation.
Upon graduation, I was hired by KDHE, Tobacco Use Prevention Program. I have now been with KDHE for almost 2.5 years in a paid position, and have been serving South Central Kansas as Outreach Coordinator for the Chronic Disease Risk Reduction grants program. I plan to work with KDHE to obtain valuable knowledge and experience, and see where life leads me with my career.

What advice would you give to someone just starting the HSMCD program?
Talk to someone in the field who works in a position that you think you are interested in. Try out different internships if possible. The more you know about what you want to do when you graduate, the better you can tailor your education to fit your needs and prepare yourself to be competitive in the field when applying for jobs.
What did you enjoy most about the HSMCD program?
The things I enjoyed most about the HSMCD program were the teachers, and the small classroom environment. The teachers in the HSMCD program were amazing. I learned so much from the field work experience and knowledge that our teachers had to share with us. I also enjoyed the small class environment. Our class formed a family that worked together closely on many projects. I now have life-long friends from my HSMCD classes.

Where did you do your practicum and what did you learn from it?
I did my practicum with KDHE, Tobacco Use Prevention Program. I loved everything about my practicum and it helped me to identify and cultivate my passion for work in tobacco prevention. As a result of my practicum, I was hired by KDHE, Tobacco Use Prevention Program to work on special projects my final senior semester of college. Upon graduation, KDHE hired me as a full-time Health Educator/Outreach Coordinator.

Describe the main responsibilities of your position.
Currently I serve South Central Kansas to identify local resources within a multi-county region, and use those resources to encourage the development of local coalitions for the prevention of tobacco use. I also provide technical assistance to local coalitions that are receiving KDHE grants, such as the Chronic Disease Risk Reduction, and Coordinated School Health grants. I assist communities in strategic planning, researching funding opportunities, applying for grants, and monitoring progress in meeting grant goals and objectives.

What are some of the things you like to do in your work?
I really enjoy working with a diverse group of people. I also like that I do not sit at a desk for the majority of my day. My job offers diverse settings and challenging situations. I also like that the work I am doing is affecting a large population in a positive way. Also, my job has afforded me the opportunity to travel regularly. I have had the opportunity to present at national conferences, and get to know people from all over the nation.

What do you find most challenging about your job/graduate program?
The thing that I find most challenging about my job is time. Sometimes I feel like there are 80 hours of work to do, and only a 40 hour work week to do it in. Our work is never done in public health. It is a challenging, but rewarding field to work in. Also, the diverse groups of individuals that I work with on a daily basis have very diverse methods of communication. Coordinating efforts among so many different individuals in different settings can be challenging.

What skills are most important for your kind of work?
People skills are the most important in my line of work. Being able to communicate appropriately with partners, strangers, and the general public is important. Public speaking skills are very important. There are many times in my job where I have to speak to people I don’t know and advise them on situations with their coalitions or community. Also, skills in coalition-building, grant writing, and research are all very important.

Where, in your opinion, is the best place to look for a job in this field?
The best places to look for a job in this field are local health departments and not-for-profit agencies. Networking is important and could someday lead to a career!

What job search methods did you use to obtain your current position?
My job search methods were not typical. My position resulted from a practicum experience. However, the internet is a great resource and it is how KDHE advertises their positions. The website www.jobs.ks.gov is a great resource for State of Kansas job opportunities like mine.

What professional organizations do you belong to? Should a student join them now?
I belong to the Kansas Public Health Association. Students who are interested in public health should definitely look into joining professional organizations that interest them now. Professional organizations allow for networking opportunities and for people to share ideas. Any exposure to professionals in a profession you are interested in could be of great value.