Why I Am Worried about My Post MPH-degree Life – A Commentary

Marissa Berrier, BA

ABSTRACT
Public health is an area where we will always need professionally-prepared people, but despite the aging of the public health workforce, some soon-to-graduate MPH students are concerned that there might not be a place for them. Perhaps now more than ever public health professional programs and schools need to devote increased resources toward internships, skill development, and job placement.


I became interested in public health when I began studying sociology in college. At the time, public health was being promoted by many universities. I watched recruiting ads by public health schools such as the University of Michigan’s “This is Public Health” campaigns and became convinced that this was the path for me. The advertisements and culture revealed to me that not only would a career in public health allow me to help people, but I would be assured of jobs at the end of my education.

My college had just finalized its public health major, which focused on teaching the community perspective. Armed with my newfound purpose, I declared my major and signed up for the required courses. I learned about health as not only a biological entity, but also as a social, cultural, political, and economic one. I have studied global and domestic issues, from HIV/AIDS to social disparities in American health and universal health insurance. I ended up loving my public health major. I daydreamed about hunting down Ebola in Africa, speaking about the importance of vaccination to a crowded auditorium, and writing health reform legislation.

I was told that my holistic approach to the concept of public health was a good thing and would make me desirable to graduate schools. At the time of my graduation I believed strongly in the instruction I had been given: that the well-rounded approach of the public health major made me a good candidate for any public health or advocacy program. However, the situation was different from what I had been told. I found that there were minimal positions available for someone with a baccalaureate degree in public health. My advisors assured me that I did not need to worry; whereas the landscape had changed, all I needed was a master of public health degree and with my qualifications, I would have my pick of programs. To my dismay, as graduation day approached, I received rejection letter after rejection letter. Each letter politely informed me that my academic record was impeccable, but they preferred that their candidates have some practical experience. My panic increased as I discovered that few public health internships were available.

Fortunately, I discovered several schools that accepted strong academic credentials in place of experience. I then enrolled in the public health program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The program, although wonderful in some ways, has caused me to worry more about my post-graduate professional life. I had expected the program to involve more job training, or that it would teach a mastery of one or more skills desirable in the public health field. I have learned many things, but I am a master of none. This deficit worries me as I see positions for epidemiologists or statisticians, but none for those who know a little of both. Finally, in my job searches, even master’s-level positions require experience; but, I see no way for a newly minted MPH to gain such experience except through internships, which are often highly competitive. Perhaps these deficiencies are somewhat mitigated by the field experience project I am currently working on. I am learning valuable skills, but at the end of the project I will still lack enough work experience to be competitive in the public health job market. I still worry as I see no straightforward career path upon graduation.

Whereas I truly love the field of public health, I feel that it has let me down. Some universities may have oversold the success and profitability of public health.
health. In addition, these same universities also have provided inadequate training programs such as baccalaureates in public health and master’s degrees with little or no job-related experience. I desire to help people, but I wonder about my future and if I will ever find a public health position for which I am qualified.

Even with this doubt, public health is vital to the well-being of our nation. I recognize that there is still a need for expansion; however, the current marketing and educational strategies must change. Marketing strategies should be changed to reflect the anticipated needs current needs in public health such as: primary care physicians, public health nurses, epidemiologists, health care educators, and administrators.

If schools are going to imply that a multitude of jobs await public health graduates, then they should support their claims by expanding job placement efforts. Finally, schools should provide practical applications of public health and work experience opportunities for students. These strategies may not cover every flaw, but they will prepare students better for the public health workforce.

Marissa Berrier (mberrier@wisc.edu) is a second year MPH student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH). She has a BA degree in Health and Society from Beloit (WI) College. This paper was part of an assignment in the SMPH’s Public Health Summer Institute course, Writing for Scholarly Publication, held July 1-11, 2013. Copyright 2013 by the Florida Public Health Review.