PUBLIC HEALTH
TEXAS A&M HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER

PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE
PRECEPTOR GUIDE
FOR
MPH AND MHA DEGREE PROGRAMS

EFFECTIVE FALL 2014
The role of the Practicum Preceptor is highly valued in our Masters programs and we hope to build an ongoing relationship between Practicum Preceptors, host site organizations, and our programs, along with current and future students.

Classroom learning alone is not sufficient preparation for students completing one of our Master’s programs. A planned, supervised, and evaluated field placement experience is a very important element of the Texas A&M Health Science Center School of Public Health (SPH) professional degree programs. The student must have an opportunity to participate in and observe the actual conduct of public health and health service professionals. As practicing health professionals, Practicum Preceptors have the opportunity, through practicum experiences, to guide and shape the preparation and education of future public health professionals.

The goal of a student’s practicum experience is to provide the opportunity to acquire skills and experience in the application of basic concepts and specialty knowledge to the solution of health problems. The overall objectives of the practicum experience are:

- Expand knowledge of basic public health and health services practices.
- Increase awareness of the complexity of the problems and concerns involved in the public health and health services arena.
- Facilitate a stronger understanding of the relationships among public health organizations, other health service organizations, and other governmental entities.
- Afford the opportunity to provide valuable service(s) to the host site organization by participating in and/or completing projects or other work assignments.
- Increase appreciation of cultural differences in populations served by public health and health services professionals.
- Provide an opportunity to apply training and concepts learned in coursework.
- Increase self-confidence as a professional in the public health and health services arena.
- Develop opportunities for references, job placement, and professional contacts.

It is not our expectation or intention that every practicum experience will serve or accomplish all of the above objectives; however, it is expected that the practicum experience will include many, if not most of these objectives. The specific objectives for the practicum experience that relate to these overall programmatic objectives will occur during the collaborative process between the Practicum Preceptor, and the student and his/her Practicum Faculty Advisor while developing a work plan.

**BEFORE THE PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE**

When a student approaches a Practicum Preceptor regarding a practicum experience proposal with the organization, it is important to discuss realistic objectives and expectations and probe for direction he/she may have received from his/her Practicum Faculty Advisor and/or Department Practicum Coordinator. If a Practicum Preceptor decides to move forward with the student, he/she will work collaboratively with the student and their Practicum Faculty Advisor and/or Department Practicum Coordinator in developing an appropriate work plan that contains a balance of professional exposure, skill application, realistic and meaningful objectives, and the opportunity to provide a valuable contribution to the organization.

The work plan is formal agreement (but not a contract) of expectations for the experience; it is an agreement among all those involved regarding the anticipated activities and outcomes. The student
will not be allowed to register for academic credit, or begin the practicum experience, until the
work plan has been completed, approved and signed by the student, the Practicum Preceptor,
his/her Practicum Faculty Advisor, and Department Practicum Coordinator.

It is important to ensure other personnel in the organization are oriented to practicum experience
expectations and the student's specific assignment. Adequate provisions should be provided for the
student to have access to appropriate workspace and support services. If appropriate, the
Practicum Preceptor should ensure that pre-arrival arrangements have been made with other
offices (e.g., human resources, employee health, orientation, etc.) and that these arrangements have
been communicated to the student.

DURING THE PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE

Once the practicum experience has begun, the Practicum Preceptor should assure that the student
is oriented to the organization. If financial compensation is part of the agreement, the Practicum
Preceptor should ensure that payroll procedures and work expectations are clearly understood
(e.g., time cards, procedures for tardiness and absences, hours of work, worker's compensation
insurance, etc.). If a specific skill set is required of the student, the Practicum Preceptor should
arrange for the necessary instruction and training.

Practicum Preceptors should review the work plan with the student and arrange to have regular,
scheduled contact with or access with the student. These meetings may also be with the Practicum
Preceptor's designee. Student should be provided with adequate space, supplies, and computing
resources to perform his/her practicum experience activities. Typically, these resources are
modest; nevertheless, the student should be able to produce and store his/her work in a secure
area as well as receive and send mail, phone, and e-mail messages.

All supplies, materials, and computing resources provided during the practicum experience remain
the property of the host organization; the student is responsible for returning the aforementioned
work related items prior to or immediately upon the completion of the practicum experience. The
student must obtain permission from the host organization and their Practicum Preceptor to keep
copies of any of the organization's reports, data, correspondence, or other related material.

As called for in the work plan, and if feasible, Practicum Preceptors are asked to provide
opportunities for the student to attend a variety of board, group, community, or other appropriate
meetings. If practical, the opportunity to observe the relationship between the organization and
other local, regional, and/or national organizations is appreciated. Providing opportunities for the
student to become familiar with the relationships between the organization, its constituents,
clientele, community, and/or specific populations served is instrumental in professional growth.

At the end of the practicum experience, Practicum Preceptors should meet with the student to
evaluate his/her performance, and provide valuable feedback on his/her activities and overall
professionalism. Practicum Preceptors should complete and return to SPH the Practicum Preceptor
Evaluation Form furnished by the student. A mailing address is provided at the bottom of the form.
If appropriate, Practicum Preceptor may write and include a letter of recommendation for the
student. A well-written letter at this time may prevent numerous requests for recommendation in
the future; this letter will be very useful to the student during his/her search for future
employment opportunities.
ETHICAL AND PERFORMANCE CONCERNS

If, at any time during the practicum experience, there is any issue or concern relating to the student’s performance, ethical or professional conduct, please contact the Department Practicum Coordinator or the student’s Practicum Faculty Advisor immediately. The following are guidelines given to all SPH students regarding expectations for proper ethical conduct during the practicum experience. Students are selected into our program based, in part, on their integrity and strength of character. However, we also recognize that these are students and are in the process of learning about professional standards for ethical behavior. Practicum Preceptors are asked to join us in assuring that students understand the importance of ethical behavior and, to the extent possible, work collaboratively with us if any issue or concern with professional standards or ethics arises during a practicum experience.

ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS

- All information related to clients of the host agency is to remain confidential.
- Students must follow standards of academic integrity as outlined in the Graduate Student Handbook and reviewed during new student orientation. Any student identified as having engaged in any acts of academic dishonesty (including, but not limited to, copying information available through the worksite and presenting it as the student’s own work to either representatives of the host organization or the Practicum Faculty Advisor) while engaged in practicum experience activities will be subject to the same standards and review process outlined in the handbook, including the possibility of dismissal.
- Students should be guided by codes of ethics most closely associated with the profession and organization of their practicum experience.
- Students are encouraged to discuss with either the Department Practicum Coordinator or their Practicum Faculty Advisor any activities they believe may potentially compromise legal or ethical standards.
- Students may undertake only those program activities explicitly assigned or authorized by host site personnel or their Practicum Faculty Advisor.
- Students should immediately report any harassment they might experience while participating in their practicum experience to the Practicum Preceptor, Practicum Faculty Advisor, department head, and/or the Department Practicum Coordinator.
- Students must report any unusual or inappropriate behavior by the host agency, personnel, or clients to the Practicum Preceptor, Practicum Faculty Advisor, department head, and/or the Department Practicum Coordinator.
- Students may not visit clients socially during regular working hours without explicit approval of the Practicum Preceptor.
- Students may not correspond with or for clients regarding matters of a professional nature without explicit approval of the Practicum Preceptor.

PERFORMANCE CONCERNS

During the course of the practicum experience, if the Practicum Preceptor, Practicum Faculty Advisor, or the Department Practicum Coordinator determines that a student is having difficulty functioning in a particular setting, he or she may reassign the student or ask him or her to take time out until the next semester. If a student’s behavior is determined to be unprofessional, unethical, or outside the rules of the organization or university, the student may face certain consequences.
Depending on the behavior, the student may be awarded a grade of "U" for the practicum experience (thus not receiving academic credit) and/or potentially being dismissed from the program.

Likewise, if during the course of the practicum experience the student deems that their activities are inappropriate or not contributing to their educational experience, the student may request a review of the circumstance by either the Practicum Faculty Advisor or the Department Practicum Coordinator. If the practicum experience is determined to be inconsistent with the philosophy or guidelines for practicum experiences, the student will be permitted to affiliate with another organization to fulfill the practicum experience requirement.

**AFTER THE PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE**

We hope, following this experience, Practicum Preceptors will want to maintain contact with SPH faculty regarding future opportunities for other students, ways to improve the student experience or contribution to the organization, and other mutual interests. Department Practicum Coordinators and/or other faculty are key contacts regarding requests for students to assist with meeting the organization’s specific needs, including requests for students with specific skills to assist with forthcoming projects.