HUMANS OF HPM
SPRING 2021
MENTEE: KATE MCBRIDE
COMPLETED HPM PHD IN 2021

So Kate, tell me a little bit about yourself.
Kate: I came to UCLA from Boston, where I was working on a patient-centered care program for Medicaid-Medicare dual eligible patients. I’m a nontraditional student-- I had applied for a master’s program, but I realized that I wanted to be on the research side, not the management side, so I transferred to the PhD. I’m really grateful to the program, the department overall, for making the transition easy-- how welcoming the faculty were, how supportive the students are. Anna was also extremely helpful throughout the process.

What was unexpected about the doctoral program? Things you did not anticipate, or wish you had prepared for?
- How important the coursework was: I did not have a research background, so coming in was very intimidating. The first courses made me feel easier about going into the program. For example, Dr. Macinko’s class provided a great introduction to research design, conceptual models and Stata. Health policy analysis with Dr. Needleman was also really beneficial. I use those skills now all the time.
- I only truly learned how to be a researcher by conducting research outside of the classroom, with faculty and at research centers. What’s great about UCLA is all the centers they have. I did a lot of meaningful research at the Center for Health Policy Research, quantitative and qualitative research with Corrina--along with her colleagues in Malawi. I also collaborated on projects with faculty at Luskin and Geffen School of Medicine. doing those projects let me see the real world implications of the work. Working with people outside of the department was beneficial and fun. What’s great about HPM is I was able to be linked with other researchers outside our department.

What do you wish was better about the PhD program?
I wish we had more professional development programming when I started the program (Dr. Rice currently runs a series now). It is a critical part of the program. It needs to be integrated, including in discussions with mentors and mentees. You can get a PhD but it’s tough to get a job. Knowing strategically how to market yourself: “If you want an academic job, then do this.” “If industry, then this.” It would have been helpful if I knew what the trajectory was in Year 1.
How did you first meet your mentor, Dr. Moucheraud?
In the first year of my PhD, Corrina taught a global health class and I reached out to her to talk about a guest speaker. I had a great conversation that spurred multiple research projects over the years. Not only did I get a great mentor—she’s super active and involved—I got so much research experience from it.

What are some challenges you faced during the PhD program?
Learning how not to get burnt out. A lot of PhD students put a lot of expectations on ourselves. We push ourselves a lot; we like the work we’re doing; we all want to strive: “I need to learn everything and I need to understand everything!” “If I do this project I’ll learn this and do this better.” It’s this constant “I gotta keep going!” that leads to burnout. I have learned to set time for myself. Set boundaries, set expectations.

What are some joys during your time here?
- Every single time you go through a hurdle—getting through comps, proposal defense—that’s such a great accomplishment. And every hurdle was celebrated by faculty and Anna. As much as parents and friends celebrate me, I felt supported by faculty all the time, especially Corrina who was my biggest cheerleader. Obviously you want to excel, but you know that if you fell? There was someone to catch you.
- TAing the politics of health policy with Dr. Rosenstock for 4 years. Working with students, working with her—I had a lot of passion for TAing.
- Learning from my cohort. Having the friends that I met at UCLA, not just my cohort but in the years above me. It’s a nice community. We always try to help each other and it’s not a competitive environment.

Now that you’ve gone through the whole program and have some perspective and wisdom, any advice you would give to a prospective student? To a 1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year student?
- **Talk to as many people and faculty as you can.** It’s not even about networking. Even if you don’t know if your interests align or they’re in other fields, it’s just good to understand what people are doing. You also never know if an opportunity will come your way. I wouldn’t have met Corrina if I didn’t talk to her and realize, “Oh! This is going to be a good fit.”
- **It also expands your skills to work with people in other departments.** CHS, epi, qual versus quant. I was able to get both strong quant and qual. I found it’s harder to get qualitative experience.
• Every year is a different challenge.
  * 1st year: **Focus on your coursework. Meet with a lot of professors.** I started on research projects my second quarter. I found it helpful to accompany coursework with research; however, other people don’t have time.
  * 2nd year: **Be flexible.** Understand fields of thought of research. Explore classes in other departments. What’s great about the department is flexibility with your cognates---within the limits of your cognate, **give yourself the chance to explore.** I was able to take a lot of epidemiology classes.

**We’ll end here: What’s one thing you do to take care of yourself?**
I go to the beach. I workout. I do sunset swims.

**Any final thoughts?**
Everyone in the HPM department was always extremely supportive. If you have a need they listen to you and they respond to you. The funding was also never difficult.
So Corrina, tell me a little bit about yourself. I've been an assistant professor in HPM at UCLA since 2015. My research is primarily about health systems and health services in low and middle income countries. I teach a few classes, advise a few students in HPM and other departments, and serve on editorial boards.

Can you tell us about how or when you decided to become a professor? I didn’t plan on going into academia. I originally thought I wanted to work for the World Health Organization or the World Bank-- doing applied policy and health systems work. In Year 4 of my program I was doing research consulting projects for CDC, World Bank, and realized the work I was hired to do was closer to the work I wanted to do. I also realized I loved teaching. I had a talk with my mentor and they said, “Sounds like you want a career in academia.” It was a late realization and I had some catch up to do.

What’s your mentorship style? Some of my students work on research projects with me, some of them work on topics I’m familiar with, some work on things I don’t know much about. Across all my students, I try to be involved-- I’m an involved mentor. I keep notes on all my students, including details on past conversations, so I remember and we don’t have to rehash. I bring a fair amount of preparedness and organization-- in return I expect my advisees to be engaged and involved as well. I have a timeframe for them to send me materials, I ask for an agenda, and I read in advance of our meeting, so that we can spend our time productively. I’m fairly structured and like to keep communication open. I think the dissertation process works best when folks are informed, when committee members are engaged.

You chose to teach at UCLA, what were the reasons that made you come? I’m a big city person. I’m from NY. LA speaks to me at a cellular level. I like being in Health Policy and Management departments, even though I actually got my degree in Global Health. I like how interdisciplinary our department is, and yet individuals are fundamentally working on similar topics. I find that inspiring and cool, and a nice way to build collaborations. Furthermore, UCLA as an institution, the strengths across the campus and schools, is incredible. I have papers projects with professors across the school. Kate McBride and I are working with Luskin and Sociology. There’s such an amazing bench of people you can work with here.
Trying to find a good mentor is a stressful process for many students. You’ve both been mentored and have mentored many students. Looking back at your experiences, what’s your advice to students who are just starting out and looking for a research mentor? What should they look for?

For those in Year 1 and 2, you should know that you can change your academic advisor. What you should look for is someone who is going to help you get through your coursework, think about and plan your cognate early, and identify how to get the skills you want. Someone who is going to connect you to other people who will help you build your network. The best dissertations are not ones you write by yourself. In terms of research mentors, look for people who have projects you can engage in. Preferably with students who are in cohorts above you. Getting exposure to different methods is really important—that should be what you aim for, papers are nice but less important at this stage in my opinion.

For those in Year 3, ideally you want a committee chair whose style matches yours. If you want someone who will meet with you often, find someone engaged. If you want someone who gives you more freedom and flexibility, find someone who is more hands off. Then there is the art of assembling your committee, bringing together diverse skills to help you finish, and who will make you feel happy and fulfilled.

Once students have a mentor or mentors, what is your advice on how to maintain that relationship?

Advice on maintaining relationships with mentors: Communicate. Once you have a dissertation committee it gets more complicated. You have multiple people. You check in during your proposal defense and then it’s very amorphous. You don’t want to get to the final dissertation defense and have it be the first time your committee members are weighing. Work with your chair to determine how often to check in and who to clear different things with. You are not going to run everything by every person. Developing a communication system is really important.

In your experience mentoring doctoral students on their dissertation, what are some common pitfalls or challenges your students have faced?

A common area of stress is the process of identifying committee members, asking them, and then going through the proposal. There’s a lot of uncertainty on how much detail you need on the proposal. The answer is “It depends.” It depends on your chair. It depends on your topic. Being anxious makes people delay it. Don’t. Reach out. Talk to your chair. Talk to Anna. Talk to other peers.
Another pitfall is not sharing drafts of chapters before it is finished. It’s not that you need to share everything with every committee member but this is what you can work with your chair to figure out. You may need to revisit your plan for when and who to get feedback from, but your committee members want to give you feedback sooner.

Figuring out how much you can do in a paper, figuring out the right scope, is a hard process for many students. I started my doctoral program because I wanted to address these really big questions. I felt demoralized when in my 3rd year I had to chip them down into these tiny bits that felt too small to be meaningful-- into specific questions. It’s part of the process. Your dissertation is not the end! It is neither the final or the best work you do. It’s the beginning. It’s a launching point not a destination.

What are some common skills, actions, or behaviors that help a student write a dissertation that they are proud of and happy with.

Be curious and open to ideas and the literature. Read a lot and embrace new directions. Accept that the three papers that you defended are not exactly the three papers you will have in your dissertation. I like intellectually curious dissertations, because a dissertation is when you can write about and work on whatever you want. Whatever career you have after, maximize that moment.

We’ll end here: what brings you joy about mentoring students?
I really love seeing when students start developing their own research questions. You can see how their coursework and the research they’ve done with faculty enable them to embark on this next stage of intellectual exploration.