
HUMANS OF HPM

FALL 2021



MENTEE: NATHANIEL ANDERSON

**Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to this program?
How did you meet your mentor/faculty advisor?**


Nathaniel: After I completed my undergraduate degree majoring in Economics from Pomona College in Claremont, CA, I started working with the Urban Institute in Washington D.C. researching health care policy related topics. It was really great exposure and I built a network of contacts. Through this network I also met Dr. Fred Zimmerman while working on the Win-Win project which was a project about modeling economic policy for various health interventions including social justice related work at the UCLA Center for Health Advancement. I found this to be a lot more engaging and interesting than the policy work I had been doing earlier. That work experience really motivated me to apply for the PhD program at UCLA and I started in 2017. Since I had been working with Fred before applying to the program, my choice of mentor was already set. I was interested in child health and took a few classes in my first year. I was also broadly interested in social determinants of health and was thinking more along the lines of working through the school system but hadn't fleshed out my ideas yet. I decided to design my own cognate in my second year.

How would you describe your mentorship relationship?

I've actually changed my topic a lot since completing cognate coursework, in large part because of Fred's mentorship. He was definitely a big part of moving me more towards social determinants and population health. He was very supportive of me exploring this space and figuring out my self-designed cognate in terms of what courses I should take and suggesting other ideas besides what I was doing. It's been really nice to watch that collaboration grow over the past several years where you do feel that you start becoming friends with your advisor which is really nice. It's not just a mentor mentee relationship, it's more personal than that.

Any recommendations about courses and the approach you took in your first, second year and beyond?

A very broad overview tip I would give is that you're going to be exposed to so much in your first year through the coursework and that's even before you get into your cognate where you start to explore on your own. In the first year, there's a lot of information coming at you and because the program has to appeal to different kinds of people, there will be some things that maybe you've seen in your undergrad work, but then there'll be something that feels out of left field that you've never done before.



For me, the hard part was not knowing anything about the health care system or what goes on in a hospital and that was really interesting to learn about. And then there's all the methods, of course, which is a lot, but you're not going to learn everything that you're taught in your first year. You're exposed to a bunch of topics and just remembering that you can come back to things later, in your dissertation, is helpful. That's really the time where I think you find yourself starting to feel better about these techniques that you've learned and you start to master it on the third or fourth pass when you're going over your old notes.

For example, I think I had learned about principal component analysis in a couple of classes, but I didn't quite understand it. I decided to go back to the materials since I had to learn it again for my dissertation. That would be one of the things I would recommend -- don't panic if it doesn't all make sense the first time -- because you're learning so much that you won't feel like a master at the first pass through.

Everyone has such different backgrounds in the program, you should really do your best to take advantage of that and learn from each other. There might be people with slightly different strengths and having them explain concepts to you can sometimes make more sense than having a professor explain it to you. I found that to be really helpful.

How did you approach meeting faculty for dissertation and research topic discussions?

The best way to approach professors is probably just to go in and see kind of what small projects they may have. Generally, people are happy to talk about their research and the projects they are working on. Maybe one of those projects makes sense for the research you want to be doing. I'd encourage people to do that, or even bring your own research topic to someone and see if they'd be interested in mentoring you through an independent study to explore different areas. Considering the multi-disciplinary nature of the program, I think it's a strong point to do that.

I wish I would have been a little more outgoing and sent more emails to professors, introducing myself and my research interests and asked for a quick 10- or 15-minute meeting. Although faculty are very busy but they're also generally very excited to find a mentee or find someone with similar research interests. They will carve out time for you; so, don't be too overwhelmed. In the case of Dr. Neil Halfon, who is part of my dissertation committee, I took his class first and then that way met him.

Any favorite courses?

I would recommend Dr. Vickie May's class on race, ethnicity and health. The course curriculum does a good job of explaining that race and ethnicity is not something you throw into your model, just because we're supposed to do it. It taught me to really interrogate and wrestle with that when thinking about why and how we're constructing our race categories or race variables. It should be based on the different experiences that many marginalized groups have had in this country and those marginalization processes are very different from one another, and they lead to different kinds of issues when it comes to health. It taught me about tailoring your interventions to meet this population whether in a clinic or hospital as a population health researcher.

The other course that I would recommend for those are interested, is the "Social Stratification, Mobility, and Inequality" course in department of Sociology. It's a two-quarter series; I took it in the winter and spring. and was taught by Jennie Brand and Michael Gaddis and it was really great. There's a lot of reading so it's definitely a lot of work. It exposes you to inequality in social mobility and to all these bigger-scale processes that matter for health.

What was unexpected about the doctoral program? Things you did not anticipate, or wish you had prepared for? What were the biggest challenges for you?

A lot of the first year or two was learning the content. But, for me, there was also a separate learning process of how to handle course load and I was working as a GSR at the time as well. I wanted to be reading and thinking about what I want to do for my dissertation and career in several years. Suddenly, I went from working a regular job to having all these different priorities that I needed to balance which I hadn't really had to do before. Learning those skills the first year or two were crucial. That is really important when it comes time to work on the dissertation because so much of it depends on being well rested and well managed, so that you can continue this self-driven project. You're not submitting things for grades any more but your progress is based on how motivated you are to put in some hours into your dissertation that day.

Academically it was challenging in the sense that, before it was about taking a test or writing a paper and I knew how to do that, but graduate school really pushes you past your boundaries, I think. There's just a lot of personal growth in this time period. It's very hard, but I would only recommend it to people who want to take it on. It is really rewarding though if you can pull it off. You need to have stubbornness in reaching the finishing line.

What did you do to maintain this self-motivation and juggling different tasks/projects?

For me keeping a regular exercise schedule is pretty important. I like to carve out an hour a day to exercise and I know lots of other people who swear by that one. People have different thoughts about this, but for me carving out two days on the weekend to myself is really important. If things get really tough, yeah maybe it's only one day, but if you work every day you're going to, I think, at least for me, I would burn out. Sometimes in academia, where everyone is trying to talk about how much they're working, I think it's important that people are taking rest too, and being able to share that we all need a day, where we just can't work all the time and regularly need to refresh. It's a marathon after all.

Figuring out your time management strategy is critical and you get better at it every day. Allowing yourself to make mistakes early on is also key in figuring this out. It's a constant process that you're always getting better at. For me, I have a hard time writing. Sitting down to write just takes a lot of mental energy for me, or even editing. I think being forgiving of yourself for the things that maybe you don't feel as good about and starting those early in the day, when you have a little more energy is a good idea. Even the process of reading a paragraph of my own work, then kind of helps me grow into actually trying to write a page of the dissertation. That works for me at least.

I definitely was a lot more structured in the first two years I've tried to be less structured with the dissertation because so much of it is just involves thinking about do you have the energy to do good work that particular day? I think it's important to cater to that, but in the first two years I had one of those little calendars I would try to budget out time where I should be getting reading done, time when I should be eating and work or studying. Having written to-do-lists, that you can cross off is very validating so I'd recommend that too.

Everyone should get a good citation manager. Get your school or advisor to pay for a good one if you can. It's really helpful when you have 10 different broad topics that you're interested in and not only can you go back to the things that you've already read and, but you don't feel like things are going in one ear and out the other. It's also helpful in tracking your progress—as in here's how much I've been reading in the past month, doing real work, and this will definitely pay off later on in my dissertation.

What was the process of selecting your dissertation committee members like? And putting together your dissertation proposal?

My dissertation proposal was about 40-pages long, double spaced document where I laid out my literature review, described the data sources and proposed methods and potential impact or contribution you see it making in the field.

Working through that proposal over six months to a year really helps you figure out where the papers are that you can write and whether or not they're feasible. Then towards the end of that process or the first proposal draft is when we started talking about other committee members and so on. Fred suggested I write a one-pager that summarizes what I want to do in each of the three papers and why I think it's important. I emailed that one-pager to potential committee members, especially the ones who I hadn't met yet and asked if they would be willing to serve. There was some exchange of emails; but they were interested, and this happened during the height of Covid-19 so a couple of faculty declined, especially clinician faculty.

Once they read through the proposal and I got comments back and after a few rounds of this, at that point I was ready to propose my dissertation before winter break in 2020.

Any professional plans you have in mind have for the future?

I'm more interested in research, either at a think tank or in a government agency, as opposed to an academic career. I was pretty open about that from the start with Fred and he's very supportive of that. I know there's this expectation that maybe you're not supposed to tell someone that you don't want to be a professor but I've never felt that way in in our department so that's been really nice.

Once I get through my second dissertation paper, I'm hoping to turn my attention to career oriented things but a traditional academic career, I think, is not for me.



MENTOR: FRED ZIMMERMAN

Looking back at the mentors in your PhD program and career, who were these individuals and how did it influence your mentorship style?

By far, my best mentor was my PhD advisor, Michael Carter, who was then at the University of Wisconsin but is now at UC Davis, working as an agricultural economist. He was very invested in our joint success. He gave some really interesting ideas and then trusted me to develop them. I think those two parts were crucial. There was the part about him helping me to become an independent scholar and him trusting my intuitions about where I wanted to go with the work.


A lot of my dissertation came out of that. But at the same time, he didn't expect me to become fully independent right away. Both parts of that were crucial and the intersection of them were essential in my development as a scholar. There was a kind of scaffolding— he didn't expect me to come up with everything on my own, he did give me some ideas, but then he stepped back and trusted me to develop them. That was really fantastic; it was a great collaboration.

How do you help your mentees grow during the dissertation process? Is there any particular advice you share with them?

I try to emulate what my dissertation advisor was able to do for me. I try to give people ideas and help them understand where the research frontier in the field is and guide them towards projects that I think are going to be interesting and help make a real contribution. But then, I also like to stand back and let the student or the post doc to take control, develop the idea and put their own stamp on it.

What advice would you give to incoming PhD students about meeting with potential advisors, picking an advisor/mentor, or a research area of interest?


I think it's really essential for students to develop an idea of what they are interested in and that takes a long time, it takes a lot of work. And, it happens to a large extent outside of classes. When I was a graduate student, we didn't have the internet, so you had to go to the library and look up these journals. Our department had a library and I would go back through the last five years of the major journals in the field; read the table of contents, read some articles, xerox the ones that I thought were the most promising. And I did an enormous amount of that kind of work. I think it's critical to not only develop a sense of the field, about what is interesting but also figure out where you might be able to make a contribution. That's a really crucial stage; your advisor can give you some ideas, and help steer you but the student needs to know what they are interested in.



In terms of identifying an advisor or mentor, it's a great idea to look for people with similar interests and although that may be obvious, that's really the key component. If the faculty member and student are on the same page, about what they think is exciting, then that relationship is probably going to work pretty well.

What advice would you give to students who are shy or feel overwhelmed while talking to professors or advisors?

I think that's an understandable reaction. UCLA is a very strong and prominent university; it's one of the best universities in the world. The school of public health is one of the best schools of public health, and the faculty are extremely accomplished. It's understandable to be a little intimidated. I don't think that students have to necessarily overcome it. They can recognize it, identify it, and compartmentalize it. They might say it is a little intimidating to talk to these big names in the field, but that's ok. That's what I'm here for and that's what they are here for — doesn't have to come between us.



As long as students remember that we are here to help each other, that students have a lot to contribute, and also learn from and teach faculty is key to a good discussion. It's ok to keep that in mind and not try to pretend that they are going to feel something different from what they do. They don't need to put a lot of obligation on themselves on feeling super confident. If a student does feel confident, that's great but if they don't, don't beat yourself up, it's understandable.

But the main thing is to focus on our joint purpose of advancing knowledge. Students have time that faculty don't have, to research a particular area and learn a lot about where the field is in one corner of public health or population health or whatever it is. If they can describe that corner of the field well to a faculty member, the faculty member really benefits from that.

Looking back on your own PhD program and career path, what are three things you wish you had done?

One thing I wish I had done is: I think I was one of the students who was a little intimidated and I wish I had had a clearer idea of my role in academia earlier on. I wish I had had a better understanding of what a student, even a student who is not very experienced, can contribute.

Secondly, I wish I had paid more attention to the quantitative methods early in my career. I came to that as an assistant professor and at that point, I learned a lot about quantitative methods and it was incredibly useful. It might have been nice to know more about that, taken it a little more seriously as a graduate student. I did catch up eventually and it wasn't a big deal but it might have been a good thing.

Thirdly, it's related to the last habit in Stephen Covey's book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. He has all these habits and they are all good to study, and offers really good advice. But the seventh habit is the one that sticks with me the most, which is sharpen the saw — Take time to nurture your own self, your personality and your connections to other people. And the part of you that is animated by things other than your work, like what brings you joy outside of work. When I was in grad school, I had a couple of good friends who were musicians in a little band. I wanted to play the upright bass with them and for a while, I rented the bass and took classes. But it didn't last. I didn't let it continue long enough. I wish I had done more of that, it really brings me joy and I think it's a very important way of maintaining balance and letting your thoughts percolate, giving your brain time off. Not only can it be productive but it is also very important- we are here as human beings, we are not here as researchers. That would be the third piece of advice I would give people — having that work life balance early on.

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

One is not taking the professor's advice. It is a delicate line because faculty aren't always right, sometimes we may not have the right instincts. Sometimes it does pay off to go in a different direction. But generally speaking, we have a lot of expertise, experience and knowledge and usually the advice that faculty give advice is pretty sound. When students don't take that advice, they often can run into trouble.

Another common pitfall that students run into is trying to take on too much with their dissertation. A dissertation just sets you up, gives you some skills to begin to change the world. You are not going to change the world with that one document; you might make a start, might make a meaningful contribution but it is necessarily going to be limited. Any collection of three papers can only go so far, so being too ambitious is another pitfall I see.

Lastly, a lot of students struggle with their time management. Sometimes it's important to get things done and quickly and I mentioned the work life balance. Paradoxically you can be more productive if you take some time out for yourself on a regular basis every week. If you're working all the time, you might be spinning your wheels and not getting anywhere. That piece about time management is super important, and it's very hard to get it right. There are a lot of internet resources on the topic but it's sort of going on a diet. I can't recommend any one approach but whatever you can stick to is probably the best approach for you. But having a time management strategy is very important.

Anything else you would like to share that I may not have asked about?

This has to do with the issues we discussed earlier; and this is the part where all of these things come together. It's useful to maintain a sense of play with this work. To understand it as a social process – science is fundamentally a social process. When we do research, we are in a dialogue with others and understanding it in that context can be helpful in figuring out how to make a contribution. Everyone else is just a human being, you're just talking to other human beings when you are writing a research article. That can be a useful way of framing things.

