

Master of Public Health

Practicum Resource Guide

HLTH 698

Liberty University
Department of Public & Community
Health
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Dear Student,

Welcome to HLTH 698, the final component of your Master of Public Health degree. This marks a major milestone in your academic journey. If you have not already done so, in preparation for your practicum you will need to complete a background check using the following link:

<https://portal.castlebranch.com/LM71>.

At this point, you should have a practicum site and site supervisor/preceptor in mind or be in the process of securing one. Your practicum must be related to the field of public health. Typically, the practicum will be conducted at a local or state Department of Health, hospital community outreach program, product safety department of a food processing company, or a consumer advocacy organization. Many students ask to complete their practicum at their current place of employment. You may do so; however, you will need to demonstrate that you are expanding your knowledge and applying health theory. This needs to be a *new* learning experience. This is your opportunity to gain experience and apply theories and principles to develop and implement special projects. You should have a hands-on community component mere research is not sufficient to receive credit.

Each student will have a different experience. The goal of the practicum is for the student to practice the public health competencies by working onsite in an approved public health setting as part of the organization's team to address a critical health issue. Your preceptor should preferably have an MPH or a Master's degree or higher with experience in public health. He or she may be a seasoned public health professional in lieu of the degree if approved by the director of the Liberty University MPH program or his designee.

Sincerely,

Giordana Morales, MPH
Practicum Coordinator
MPH Program

Prerequisites

In order to sign up for a practicum experience students must do the following:

- 1) Successfully complete the core MPH course and your area of specialization.
ALL core and specialization courses must be successfully completed before the practicum, no exceptions will be made
 - *You may take elective courses during the practicum*
 - *A grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 is necessary to enroll in the practicum*
- 2) Complete your background check
- 3) Complete the MPH Practicum APEX (link found on next page)
- 4) Complete the MPH Portfolio
- 5) Complete the MPH Practicum Agreement
- 6) Take the competency exam (HLTH 600)

Requirements

- 1) One hundred and twenty (120) contact hours (minimum) of public health practice and application
- 2) A predefined project (epidemiological research, education, program planning or evaluation, etc.) that assists an organization in addressing an unmet need while supporting student growth in developing skills in public health practice
- 3) Preceptor and site approval from Program Director and Practicum Coordinator

Structure

- 1) **Timeframe:** A student signed up for the practicum must complete 120 hours minimum in a public health setting over a 15 week period/one semester
- 2) **Online component:** The online class component will serve to connect student learning and provide opportunities for cross discussion
- 3) **Minimum hours:** It is recognized that more than 120 hours may be necessary to accomplish the joint goals of the student and the preceptor. Therefore, an individual project may need more than 120 hours to be completed

Student Checklist for Completion of Practicum

- Step 1: Complete the prerequisite course requirements which include the core and track courses (Core: HLTH 501, 503, 505, 507, 509, and 511 plus your area of specialization)
- Step 2: Complete Background check
<https://portal.castlebranch.com/LM71>
- Step 3: Begin your practicum site search and practicum registration application at:
<https://apex.liberty.edu/apex/banprd/f?p=1600>
- Step 4: Identify and meet with Practicum Sites and Site Supervisor/preceptor.
- Step 5: Completed the practicum registration application, attaching all necessary documents to APEX
- Step 6a: Complete and record a minimum of 120 hours of experience. Submit these hours using the Practicum Log form sent by email when you were approved for the practicum
- Step 6b: Complete presentation and paper for HLTH 698 and all other requirements within HLTH 698.

***Be aware:**

This class is happening concurrently with your practical hours.
Plan accordingly to have sufficient time to complete both.

Reporting Requirements

Absences: If for any reason, you find it necessary to be absent from your field experience (e.g. due to sickness) you must let your preceptor and your professor know immediately and, when possible, in advance. Failure to do so is unprofessional and unacceptable and may negatively affect your performance evaluation.

Change in address, phone number or name: Immediately notify your preceptor, professor, and MPH practicum coordinator. It is imperative that we are able to contact you without undue delay should the need arise.

Other issues and problems: Contact your preceptor and/or professor

Always remember you are representing Liberty University and conduct yourself accordingly. At all times, you are a guest of the affiliate organization and must abide by all their personnel policies (e.g. drug testing, dress code, absenteeism). If you have any questions or concerns, please discuss the situation with your preceptor.

You are expected to accept all assignments graciously and complete each of them in a professional, competent and timely manner. Seek opportunities to display initiative to make a contribution above and beyond basic expectations. This will prove to be a great benefit to you and to the affiliate organization.

Practicum Placement

The responsibility of creating an exceptional practicum experience ultimately relies on the student. However, the student is not alone in this pursuit. The student will work closely with the MPH practicum coordinator, HLTH 698 professor, and director of the MPH program when needed.

To start the placement process a student will:

- Review practicum requirements
- Contact the MPH practicum coordinator to receive approval to begin the process
- Create a student profile packet for preceptor sites (to include a current vitae, a letter of interest, practicum goals, and letters of reference)
- Have 2-3 places/people in mind to contact
- Fill out the practicum application and keep the MPH practicum coordinator update on your progress
- Secure a preceptor at least one month before HLTH 698 begins and fill out the practicum registration form and student agreement along with any forms required by the location of the practicum. (Keep in mind that it takes time to obtain all the proper signatures within the university, the earlier you can complete your paperwork the better)

The Practicum Site Supervisor/Preceptor Should Have:

- Substantial experience with the organization
- A working knowledge and practical experience in the project areas assigned to you
- An interest in and commitment to helping you
- Sound have an MPH or approved by the director

Responsibilities of Preceptor and Host Sites

The goal of the practicum is to help grow the student personally and professional for a career in the field of public health. The experience is intended to provide students with an opportunity to develop professional skills in a public health setting while contributing to the needs of an organization. The school recognizes that this goal needs the support and commitment from community partners that are practicing public health in various settings. The primary responsibilities of a host site and preceptor are to:

- Work with students to develop a realistic graduate level project within the practicum time commitment, and student schedule that aligns with the student's specific degree specialty.
- Provide the student with a background about the organization and project
- Be available to meet with student, provide supervision, and feedback
- Provide resources for students to complete project (i.e. office space, computer, access to data)
- Provide written feedback for the student and the school by completing an evaluation form at the end of practicum. This will be for a grade because it is an important component of the student's work.
- Support students in professional development activities (i.e. include in staff meetings, introduce organizational leaders, invite to professional events).
- Establishes a regular meeting time with you, sets standards for your reporting, and arranges for a substitute site supervisor during periods when he/she will not be at the site.
- Signs the Practicum Contract Hour Log for time spent with the site.

Preceptor and Host Site Benefits

The practicum experience has great value to the student's development. Hosting a student also provides benefits to the organization.

- Students complete or conduct projects the organization may not have capacity to do
- Students provide an inquisitive approach and may provide creative ideas and solution
- Students build professional capacity and may be recruited to become part of the organization's workforce
- Organizations and preceptors have an impact on the field of public health by participating in the education of future professionals.

For the Preceptors and Affiliate Organizations

Affiliate (host) organizations are pursued and selected because the university and our program believes that organization can offer LU Public Health students excellent opportunities, activities and expertise necessary for an effective “reality based” learning experience. We are fortunate to have and are grateful for your commitment.

Thank you!

To facilitate a smooth and effective field experience it is important the hosting affiliate, and particularly the designated preceptor, begin planning before the student arrives.

The faculty expect students to arrive at their practicum with a drafted set of “learning objectives” but the overall responsibility for designing and facilitating the field experience lies with the affiliate organization. Beginning by asking the student, “What would you like to do while you are here?” will likely not prove effective because as you may expect, at this stage, students often do not know and the experience gets off to an uncertain start.

Please discuss exposures and projects the field experience could include and, equally important, what you will expect of the student. Doing this by letter, or better, through personal contact (e.g. an interview) prior to the student’s arrival is time well spent. This goes a long way for a mutually rewarding experience.

A few things to consider:

1. Are activities included in field experiences relevant to:
 - a. course objectives and student specialization
 - i. the mission, services and activities of the affiliate organization;
 - ii. the student’s interests and capabilities;
 - iii. the amount of time student will spend at the field setting;
 - iv. the student’s post-graduation goals?
2. Orient the student to the organization prior to arrival. This may include literature, internet materials, interviews or an established orientation program.
3. Communication is critical so preceptors/supervisors need to set aside scheduled time to adequately interact with the student.
4. Provide a diverse variety of exposures to broaden the student’s awareness and perspective. This is a time many students begin to form a professional vision.
5. Assist the student in transitioning from an observer to a productive participant as quickly as feasible. The semester will pass by faster than you may realize.

6. Assume the student has the potential to be productive. Provide opportunities for them to “show their stuff”. Students are a valid human resource and they want to contribute.
7. Assign project work that might represent *experience* for the student’s resume when they are seeking subsequent employment.
8. Help student relate field experiences to their previous academic studies.
9. Complete and submit the midterm and final evaluations in accordance with the procedure and schedule outlined elsewhere in this handbook.
10. Candidly discuss your evaluations with the student and offer professional advice and recommendations. Our students want and value your feedback.

Finally, should you experience a problem during the semester, do not hesitate to contact the Practicum Coordinator, Giordana Morales, at 434-582-2513 or gmorales11@liberty.edu.

Some suggestions to help you get started:

1. Orientation to the organization:

- a. Introduce students to key personnel
- b. Provide an acquaintance tour of facilities
- c. Include students in conferences and field visits with selected personnel.
- d. Review essential policies and procedures briefly
- e. Review your organizations’ services
- f. Include the student in staff meetings

2. Orientation to the community (area in general):

- a. Visit health related agencies such as hospitals, nursing homes, voluntary health agencies, managed care organizations, customers etc.
- b. Attend open community meetings that are concerned with health education, and community development.
- c. Meet and interact with community leaders, local officials, as well as key ‘players’ in health, education and human service agencies, agriculture, recreation, business, industry, civic and service organizations and media.

3. Involvement in organizational activities:

- a. Participate in appropriate organization orientation
- b. Participate in staff/board meetings.
- c. Assist in planning programs or related components.
- d. Participate in delivering/presenting organizational programs.

- e. Work on communication activities, such as:
 - (a) Newspaper articles, press releases.
 - (b) Write radio or TV spot announcements.
 - (c) Develop and deliver oral presentations to groups.
 - (d) Work on quarterly or annual report or newsletters.
 - (e) Design and produce bulletin boards or pamphlets.
 - (f) Assist in planning and conducting a specific activity.
- f. Assemble, interpret and analyze data, records and reports.
- g. Participate in workshops, seminars, in-service training
- h. Conduct focused study and/or research.
- i. Participate in community service activities.

4. Ensure clear communication:

Clear communication is an essential element during the field experience. The following cannot be stressed enough:

- a. Clarify intern's role through the formal learning agreement (objectives). Clarify job responsibilities, set goals, set regular work hours, etc.
- b. Schedule regular meetings with the student to discuss new and past assignments, to answer any questions, and discuss dynamics of the organization.
- c. Expose student to meetings (planning, budget, management, board, community or legislative) whenever possible. They have been briefed on confidentiality.
- d. Explain how decisions are made. What are the options? How did the organization develop an operational plan?
- e. When possible, emphasize quality and process improvement initiatives.
- f. Discuss career opportunities in the field, and career paths for public health graduates.
- g. Share opportunities for professional introductions.
- h. Structure supervision more highly in the beginning, and ease off as appropriate.
- i. Reinforce independent creativity and productivity.
- j. Again, students want and need regular, descriptive feedback. Let them know if they are meeting expectations. What they can do better? Do not be reserved about letting them know.
- k. If problems occur, speak directly with the student just as you would an employee.

Recognition

No expectation or policy is defined for this area. Supervisors are, however, encouraged to recognize students and acknowledge their contributions when deemed appropriate.

Some possibilities include:

- Note the student by name on any completed project.
- Include student in professional seminars, workshops within or outside the organization.
- Give the student opportunities to interact with several departments within the organization.
- Provide opportunities to meet and interact with multi-level leadership, constituents, customers and professional contacts.
- Suggest how the student could transfer his/her skills to positions for which they may be qualified.
- Write about them in the company newsletter - or better yet, have them write about themselves.
- Add the student's name to the organization's telephone directory, assign them an e-mail account etc.
- Post the student's picture on the bulletin board.
- Give them a title other than "intern," "student," or "volunteer."
- Provide a designated workstation with appropriate tools.
- Help identify and "mine" contacts for future job hunting.
- Recommend or offer a paid position following the field experience.

Motivation

- Treat the student as a member of the organization's "team".
- Challenge the student – they want to show you what they can do.
- Respect the student's talents and abilities by soliciting and considering their opinions, ideas and suggestions.
- Select/organize assignments such that accomplishment and progress is observable by the student and may represent professional "experience".
- Provide mentoring and training.
- Give constructive praise and criticism.
- Help students recognize how their work effort relates to other areas within your organization or perhaps a broader continuum of public health/health services.

NOTE: Activities listed above are not all-inclusive or specifically required. They relate to the student's academic preparation and are offered as suggestions.

Tips for Making the Best of Your Field Experience

Students, please read and do the following:

1. Learn as much as possible about the affiliate organization before you get there. *(Acquire and read materials, e.g., annual reports, media reports, program literature, strategic plans, Internet search).*
2. Approach the field experience with an open and inquisitive mind:
 - ✓ Seek opportunities to observe and learn.
 - ✓ Seek opportunities to make a contribution
 - ✓ Enjoy the experience, the organization and the people..
3. Display respect for your preceptor ... she/he will do the same for you.
4. Be prepared and reliable in all situations.
5. Consistently display professionalism and maturity.
6. Be conscientious, prompt and perform to the best of your ability.
7. Be confident -- confidence and poise breed success.
8. Be proactive. Plan ahead. Do not procrastinate. Do not be negligent.
9. Take initiative to "fit in" ... Become a team member.
10. Don't be bashful or afraid to get involved.
11. Be aware that your host organization gains benefit from your presence and participation, but also recognize that they are investing time and resources in support of your learning experience.

What you can expect:

There are a number of potential benefits for you during the field experience. Likewise, there may be some misperceptions about practicum students that should be clarified.

This is a required academic course (HLTH 698)

Although a field experience is usually pursued outside of the college setting it should not be viewed as "time-out" from school. A field experience is a unique learning opportunity and is a required academic course. Remember, your grade and subsequent credit for this course is based on how proficiently you demonstrate the core knowledge and skills you have acquired during your public health coursework and activities. In addition, professional traits such as reliability, initiative, creativity, attitude, interaction with co-workers, analytical and communication skills will be evaluated.

This is a challenging opportunity

Most students report working just as hard, if not harder, during their field experience as they did for on-campus courses. Completion of a field experience while taking additional courses dilutes the value of this unique opportunity. Only in highly unusual circumstances will a student be permitted to take additional courses during the field experience semester. **In these rare cases, advanced permission from the director is required.**

You are not a "Volunteer"

Field study students (interns) typically are not paid. However, this field experience is not to be confused with a volunteer arrangement. You are graded, and earn academic credit, based on what you learn and how you perform. It is important to keep one eye on the learning objectives and the other on "opportunities" to maximize the value of this experience.

You are not an "Expert in Residence"

As a graduate student, you possess specific skills, knowledge, and fresh ideas. It is not appropriate, however, for an organization to expect you to be the "resident expert" or to fill a knowledge gap in an area in which the staff lacks basic skills or expertise. In fact, a professional staff person with expertise in the area in which you are assigned should supervise you. At the same time, it will be to your advantage to share your ideas and suggestions.

Projects and work assignments should be meaningful

Your field experience should not be limited to routine, clerical or unchallenging tasks. The experience is intended to provide meaningful learning. At the same time, reality in the workplace is that most positions and projects involve some mundane tasks and you should be willing to "do whatever it takes" to fulfill assignments and produce desired outcomes. However, it is recommended that administrative or clerical tasks be limited to twenty percent of your time as a student intern. If this appears to be an issue, ask your preceptor for more challenging duties or talk with your academic advisor.

There is no guaranteed employment or compensation

Students are occasionally offered part or full-time employment as a result of their field experience but this is not guaranteed and should not be expected. Many prospective employers do, however, value even limited relevant work experience so keep in mind that as you compete for a future position your field study project(s) may prove beneficial. One excellent way to gain a valuable career and job seeking benefits during your field study is to nurture professional relationships with people in the affiliate organization. This opportunity to develop an information and professional network can be invaluable. Most importantly, earn a reputation as someone who takes an assignment and runs with it. Again, it is the rare exception that students are financially compensated during the field experience, but many other rewards are available to you.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is the practicum paid?

Agencies and organizations may provide paid or unpaid practicum opportunities. Students should not expect financial support during the practicum.

Can I do the practicum at my current job?

If you are contemplating a practicum at your regular place of employment, the assignment must extend beyond your regular work duties and allow application of knowledge and skills acquired through the MPH course of study.

After I have finished my practicum, what next?

For most students the practicum is the last course within the master's program. Students should plan to meet application deadlines to participate in graduation in May. These deadlines can be found at Liberty University registrar's website. We encourage all students, residential and online, to participate in graduation ceremonies and events.

What is a suggested timeline for the practicum?

HLTH 698 should be taken in the final semester of your program. This will be in the spring semester for students planning to graduate in May. Planning for the practicum should take place the semester prior to taking the course. Since some of our classes are offered year round students may be able to take the practicum in a fall semester. These students need to begin planning in the previous spring.

Do I need an MOA?

That depends on the site. If your preceptor requests a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), contact the Practicum Coordinator to begin this process.