

Practical Professionalism

Health Science Students Put Theory into Practice

As a gust of crisp November air surges between the parting glass doors, Kara Mellonakos ('08) reaches to stifle a whirlwind of papers before they spin off her desk. Handing a clipboard to the mother of a boy whose latest bicycle stunt earned him the adoration of his friends, and likely a few stitches, she picks up the phone to field the call of a concerned daughter whose father had slipped and fallen in his kitchen.



Kara Mellonakos ('08) consults with a patient at the Massachusetts General Hospital Emergency Department, where she served as a unit coordinator. "My experience has helped me develop a clearer understanding of the best ways to treat individuals who are going through, or have a loved one going through, a traumatic life event," she says.

The chaos is enough to rattle those with less poise, but not Mellonakos. She's seen it all before. Thanks to Sargent's health science practicum program, Mellonakos is learning firsthand what it's like to serve on a hospital's front line—the emergency department—by spending a semester as a unit coordinator at Massachusetts General Hospital.

Directed by Clinical Associate Professor Eileen O'Keefe and Academic Clinical Coordinator Shelley Brown (SPH'07), the practicum program offers students a broad range of opportunities to apply their classroom studies, learn from professionals, and fine-tune their career goals. The program has grown rapidly since it began four years ago. Currently more than 140 students are enrolled—some work directly with patients, while others develop medical information technology, conduct drug studies, or help draft health care legislation.

While many traditional internships consign students to administra-

tive duties, the health sciences practicum requires more active involvement. “We want all practicum students to have a very hands-on experience,” says Brown. “It’s a rare approach; the practicum experience is much more like what you’d find in a graduate-level clinical program.”

“By allowing students to do research, learn policy, and really get into the field, the practicum enables students to grow. Overall, we emphasize the active development of skills, and stress the application of what they are learning. We want to develop professionals.”

With 55 practicum locations throughout Boston alone, the program presents a prime opportunity for students to work alongside professionals at the highest levels of their fields. Many students find placements at Boston Medical Center, thanks to its relationship with the University, or at one of the city’s other world-renowned hospitals. Others work in non-clinical settings such as legal firms or non-profit advocacy offices.

Last fall, Timothy Bersak ('07, CAS'07), who received dual degrees in health science and economics, found a position that combined his interests at Stackpole & Associates, in Brookline, Massachusetts. It’s a health care consulting firm specializing in research, marketing, training, and organizational development in the senior living and human services sectors. Much of Bersak’s work involved conducting market research in order to promote a

new product designed to prevent pressure ulcers. “My practicum gave me insight into the business side of health care,” he says. “I learned about the various steps that must be taken in order to sell goods or services in the health care market.”

A host of practicum opportunities exist beyond the Boston area as well, both nationally and abroad. Elena



Above: Christian Cansino ('08) with Kathy Morgan, professor and chair of the Department of Health Sciences. Rigorous practicum requirements for students include logging 120 on-site work hours, agreeing to learning contracts, attending seminars, completing a journal and evaluation, and making a poster presentation of their work.

Quattrone ('08) worked for the Department of Health and Human Services Office on Disability in Washington, D.C., which oversees the creation and coordination of programs, policies, and special initiatives targeting more than

50 million disabled Americans. Among Quattrone’s duties was serving as project manager for emergency preparedness initiatives, which ensure that people with disabilities are provided appropriate care in emergency situations. She also assisted in the implementation of programs such as the New Freedom Initiative, which seeks to increase the disabled population’s access to assistive technologies, as well as educational and employment opportunities. “It was an eye-opening experience,” says Quattrone. “I gained an understanding of people with disabilities from a public health and human services perspective while learning about the processes behind the development of legislation.”

Many practicum opportunities arise from Sargent’s network of faculty and alumni. The College recently formed a partnership with Sterling Planning Alliance—a Boston-based

architecture firm that plans and designs health facilities—through Senior Health Planner Nancy O’Hare ('86), a part-time instructor and guest lecturer at Sargent. “That she has stayed in contact is a testament to the strength of the program and the commitment of alumni,” says Brown. “It captures the sense of community that still exists after graduation and helps students realize that they will always have a home here.”

According to Brown, the lasting connections that students make through their practicums are beneficial to their future careers as well as to the continued success of the program. “It’s about building relationships,” she says.

And, as with all programs at Sargent, the students bring away more knowledge because they invest themselves more fully in the experience. “The practicum is a chance for students to grow,” says Brown. “This is their opportunity.” ■



Left: As an intern at the Institute for Community Health in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Katie Volpa ('07, SPH'08), left, worked on a research project helping hospitals and clinics implement a new regulation that requires them to collect the race and ethnicity of every patient. She also developed posters and pamphlets in several languages to help non-English speakers better understand why they were being asked for the information.