MPH Practicum
Guide for Preceptors

College of Graduate Health Studies
A.T. Still University
Kirksville, Missouri
Mesa, Arizona
ATSU MPH Practicum Introduction for Preceptors

Introduction

Thank you for considering or accepting the role of Practicum Preceptor (site supervisor) for one of our MPH students during their field experience. The cornerstone of professional education for a career in public health is a learning process that effectively couples the classroom didactic and field experience components of the educational program. The practicum is an opportunity to apply theories, concepts, principles, and skills to issues in the real world. The preceptor plays an essential part in this educational process and we in the Public Health Program at A.T. Still University deeply appreciate your willingness to share knowledge and experience with our student.

Through the practicum experience, a preceptor and a faculty advisor pool their expertise for the benefit of the student who is preparing for a future in public health. Of course, the faculty advisor and practicum preceptor also benefit from such an affiliation. Faculty members gain the opportunity to keep abreast of various fields of practice. Similarly, practicum preceptors gain the benefit and satisfaction of mentoring a future professional while they and their organizations also realize the many contributions that graduate students in training can make.

It is our hope that this handbook will provide you with the information you need to understand the practicum process. If you would like any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact the Practicum Coordinator, Dr. Greg Loeben, at gloeben@atsu.edu or 602-697-5253.

The MPH Practicum

The Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) requires that “All professional degree students must develop skills in basic public health concepts and demonstrate the application of these concepts through a practice experience that is relevant to the students’ areas of specialization.” (CEPH, School of Public Health Accreditation Criteria, Amended June 2005). Accordingly, the MPH students at A.T. Still University must complete a field experience known as a practicum.

The practicum is a planned and supervised learning experience involving first-hand participation and operational responsibility for a supervised project in a public health or health services organization. In addition to gaining some breadth of experience within the host organization, students must identify a deliverable outcome and work to produce the outcome, such as solution of a specific management problem or policy issue, preparing a business plan, evaluation of a program, and so forth.
The practicum requires 240 contact hours. A minimum of 200 of the 240 hours must be conducted onsite or on aspects of the practicum that require travel or an outside location. No more than 40 hours of the 240 total should be offsite “background research,” such as literature reviews, demographic or statistical searches, reviewing current best practices, etc. As part of the project, students are required to identify a location, a preceptor, and a faculty advisor; create a proposal; complete the hours; write a final report; and give a final presentation. The final report is a substantial academic written deliverable detailing the practicum project and experience.

Identification of the site and a preceptor are the responsibility of the student, though the MPH Program must approve these. The preceptor must have sufficient public health credentials through training and/or experience to function as an effective public health mentor. Preceptors must provide a resume or curricula vitae (cv) as evidence of their qualifications to fulfill the preceptor role. If a resume/cv is not available, there is a Preceptor Credentials Form. The resume/cv or the Credentials Form can be submitted directly to the Practicum Coordinator, Dr. Greg Loeben (gloeben@atsu.edu) or to the student who will forward it appropriately. This document will be kept on file for accreditation purposes, but will not be shared with anyone else.

Along with securing a preceptor, a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) must be completed and submitted to the University. This is a legal document establishing the practicum site and spelling out the basic obligations of the parties involved. The student can provide an electronic copy to the Preceptor and/or the organization to be filled out, signed and returned. In instances where the site wants to modify the agreement or use its own agreement, simply contact the practicum coordinator. Such situations are almost always agreeably resolved.

Students have one year from the start of the practicum course (not from the start of the onsite hours) to complete all aspects of the course. Scheduling of the practicum contact hours is left up to the student and practicum preceptor in order to best meet their needs. The student must keep a field log of contact hours and the preceptor must approve this at the end of the practicum.

**Goals of the Practicum**

The overarching goal of the practicum is to provide students with an experiential bridge between their classroom learning and practical field activities. More specifically, students are required to create a project that helps the practicum site and preceptor to accomplish some of their important goals while also allowing the student to fulfill learning objectives. The learning objectives are created as part of the student’s project proposal.

Along with allowing the student to apply knowledge and skills, the practicum should help socialize the student into the field of public health, while also giving them a chance to
reflect on various aspects of project development and planning, institutional structure, and leadership.

Student, Faculty Advisor, Preceptor and Practicum Coordinator Responsibilities

a) Student Responsibilities

- Identify a willing Faculty Advisor and inform the Practicum Coordinator
- Identify a site/location/organization, have it approved by the Practicum Coordinator, and secure a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with that site.
- Identify a qualified Practicum Preceptor at that site and have that person approved by the Practicum Coordinator
- Introduce your Faculty Advisor and Practicum Coordinator via e-mail
- Complete and submit the Pre-proposal Concept Statement Form to your advisor prior to writing your proposal
- Develop a project idea and write a formal proposal
- Complete the 240 project contact hours and track these in the field log
- Write a final report
- Create and deliver to your faculty advisor a summary final oral presentation (including a visual presentation component – e.g., a PowerPoint presentation)
- Upload and complete all required documentation in Tk20

b) Faculty Advisor Responsibilities

The Faculty Advisor’s role in preparing students for their careers is pivotal. As educators, they transmit ideas and stimulate thinking. The Faculty Advisor has the following responsibilities:

- Work directly with the student to clarify the objectives of the practicum
- Collaborate with the student to develop practicum learning outcomes based on student knowledge, background, and interests
- Assist the student with securing a practicum site and professional preceptor.
- Approve the pre-proposal concept form and the practicum proposal
- Recommend academic and professional sources of information appropriate to the student’s practicum topic
- Respond to student inquiries/requests for advice during the practicum
- Communicate with Practicum Preceptor to ensure a successful student and preceptor experience
- Read and provide feedback on student's proposal, final report, and the final oral presentation to develop an overall evaluation of the practicum
- Evaluate the student and complete final evaluation documents in Tk20
c) Practicum Preceptor Responsibilities

The Practicum Preceptor serves as the student’s supervisor at the practicum site. The Practicum Preceptor has the following responsibilities:

- Understand practicum requirements and an ability to meet them
- Identify suitable projects, including initial identification of specific management problem areas or policy issues
- Provide the student an overall orientation to the site, to make the student feel welcome
- Discuss and involve the student in meetings with governance and management, relevant to the practicum project
- Have regular (preferably at least weekly) meetings/communication with the student during the practicum
- Work with the Faculty Advisor to design or adjust the experience as needed
- Read, provide feedback, and final approval on student's proposal and final report
- Evaluate the student and complete final evaluation documents in Tk20

d) Practicum Coordinator Responsibilities

The Practicum Coordinator oversees the Practicum. The Practicum Coordinator has the following responsibilities:

- Available to students, faculty advisor, or preceptor throughout the practicum for guidance or information
- Available to help student find practicum site, project, preceptor, or faculty advisor
- Approves student's proposed practicum site and preceptor
- Receives Memorandum of Agreement with site and can work with site to clarify or modify MOA
- Reviews proposals for human subjects research and IRB requirements
- Gives final approval to proposal, which allows students to begin counting additional onsite hours
- Tracks student progress and facilitates completion of the necessary administrative components of the practicum
- When requested reads and provides feedback on student's proposal and final report
- Point of contact for any questions, issues or concerns
Outline of Student’s Steps to Begin the Practicum

Setting up the practicum’s 240 contact hours includes:

1. Selecting a faculty advisor.
2. Finding a site and a preceptor.
3. Getting the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) signed by the site.
4. Creating a project idea and submitting a Pre-Project Concept Form to the faculty advisor for initial approval.
5. Developing the project in detail and writing a Project Proposal in conjunction with the preceptor and advisor. The proposal must match a template provided in the course. This is a process that often takes multiple drafts and revisions. In addition, the proposal must match a proposal template provided in the course.
6. After the Proposal is finished and approved a determination is made whether the project entails any human subjects research and needs IRB review. IRB submission must be completed if necessary.

Students can count up to 20 hours preparing their proposal. All of these steps must take place before the student can count any more of their 240 contact hours.

Some students make the mistake of finding a site and preceptor and then starting or intending to start their 240 hours prior to completing these other necessary preliminary steps. The result is that they do not get to count the hours, they feel rushed and frustrated, the preceptor gets confused and/or agitated, and the student’s project and experience suffer. Please help the students recognize that planning ahead is essential.

Outline of Student’s Steps to Wrap-Up the Practicum

During the 240 contact hours the preceptor is the primary supervisor of the student. The faculty advisor and practicum coordinator are available to help, but generally allow the student and preceptor to handle the details of how the student’s time will be spent in order to complete the agreed upon project.

After the 240 hours are completed the student will need to:

1. Write and submit a final report that must be approved by the preceptor and faculty advisor. This is a process that usually entails multiple drafts with feedback and revisions. In addition, the final report format must meet a template provided in the course.
2. Provide an oral and visual (e.g., PowerPoint) presentation of the final report to the faculty advisor.
3. Complete a Practicum Evaluation Form.
Tk20

During the student’s practicum the preceptor will be expected to complete several small tasks online. The MPH Program utilizes an online system, known as Tk20, in which the student will submit most of the required documentation and work produced. The preceptor and advisor will also use Tk20 to sign off on approvals and other components of their roles. Directions for how to access Tk20 will be emailed to you after the student has begun their practicum with you. On Tk20 the preceptor will:

1. Provide approval of the student’s project proposal.
2. Provide final approval of the student’s final report.
3. Approve the student’s field hour log.
4. Complete a student evaluation form.

Suggestions for Successful Preceptors/Practicums

The most rewarding projects are those that combine the student’s interests with the actual needs of the practicum site. The activities that students are allowed to witness and/or participate in make all the difference in the quality of the practicum. Preceptors are encouraged to think creatively about how to best utilize students while also making the experience meaningful for them. While some basic administrative tasks may be a necessary component, these are generally not sufficient for a Masters level practicum student. Giving students greater responsibility will help them grow professionally while also increasing the value of the work they do for your organization. While the student has a primary project that defines their practicum, we encourage the preceptor to expose the student to a broad range of activities. Students are encouraged, if time allows, to spend some limited number of onsite hours learning and experiencing more about the organization and its other projects.

Additional Information

Again, thank you for your willingness to precept one of our MPH students. Please feel free to contact the student’s advisor at any time. In addition, please do not hesitate to contact the Practicum Coordinator Dr. Greg Loeben at gloeben@atsu.edu or 602-697-5253, who will be happy to help you in any way he can.

If you would like a copy of the complete MPH Practicum Course Syllabus that the student must follow simply ask the student or the Practicum Coordinator for a copy.