

Things To Look Forward To...

Holly Nevarez, Doctoral Student

Oregon State University

Abstract

A health education doctoral student at Oregon State University gives her perspective on life as a doctoral student. She wrestles with the questions, "What is your area of interest?" and "What are you going to do?"

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Keywords: doctoral student, health education, health professions, professional preparation

I started working towards my doctoral degree in health education and promotion one year ago. Since the time I started the program, there has been a reoccurring question, "What is your area of interest?" This question is not as simple to answer as it might seem. Although I have my bachelor's degree in health education and my master's in community health administration I did not have a specific area of focus. Then again, it seemed I had many topics I felt great passion for.

So, I began to name some of these topics as my areas of interest. Depending on the day, I might be interested in safer sex, drug and alcohol abuse, obesity, or maternal/child health. My answer to the question started to revolve around which courses I was taking at the time. As the year went on, the list became longer, and it became increasingly difficult to define an area of interest.

Creating a somewhat accurate answer took a year. When asked, I now answer, "I am interested in studying and developing programs to create healthy families to reduce future risky behaviors." While I understand this is very broad, at least it is not an infinite and constantly changing list.

Now it seems that since I have an answer to this question, there is a second big question, "What are you going to do?" Like before, the answer to this question is not as simple as it might seem

and varies some. However, this answer fluctuates based on my level of optimism.

Some days I think I am going to change the world in which we live. I am going to be a professor and educate the future health educators of America. My students will go out and make people want to live healthier lives. In my free time, I will conduct groundbreaking research that will improve family relationships and stop children from participating in risky behaviors. It will be wonderful!

Other days I am not so hopeful. The challenge of getting even one person to change a behavior that they learned from their parents, who learned the behavior from their parents, and so on seems impossible. On those days I think, "How can I change that one? Just one?" Then, my optimism returns and I think, "Who is to say one isn't enough?" What if I am able to change that person's behavior so that he does not start smoking, does not practice sexual behaviors that could result in AIDS, or improves his mental health? It would still be wonderful!

I understand that I cannot be the super hero of public health. I don't believe the title has ever been granted. In the class I teach, I try to explain the public health perspective. I lecture that as public health professionals we look at a community and try to assess what health issues could be improved or need to be addressed. I point out to my class how this is different from a

physician who looks at an individual patient and tries to assess what health issues could be improved or need to be addressed for that patient. I believe this is true for public health professionals. We work as a team. We research what makes people behave certain ways and how to change that behavior. However and importantly, this task cannot be accomplished by individuals – we must work as a team

To me, the beauty of public health is that there is so much work to be done and so many areas to work in. The options seem endless. Should I

work in research or teach? What area of research should I begin with?

I have some big hurdles looming in my future including taking my comprehensive exams, writing and researching my dissertation, and getting a job, just to name a few. I hope that these experiences help me to better answer both of the questions above. However, I am relatively certain that regardless of how I answer the questions today, I will not answer them the same way in ten years. Again, this is one of the wonderful things about the field of public health, the constant change.

Author Information

Holly Nevarez, BS, MPS, Doctoral Student
Department of Public Health
Oregon State University
256 Waldo Hall
Corvallis, Oregon 97331-6406
Ph. 541-737-3828
E-Mail: nevarezh@onid.orst.edu