RESULTS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AND FAMILY HEALTH’S PHD ALUMNI SURVEY

PART 2

YEARS 2005-2014

SUBMITTED BY:

Karen D. Liller, PhD, Professor, AAAS Fellow
Department of Community and Family Health
College of Public Health

Morgan Lee, MA
PhD Candidate (Department of Psychology)/MPH Student

June 30, 2015
Introduction: The Department of Community and Family Health (CFH) has developed several strategies to reach out to its PhD alumni to learn of their professional trajectories and perceptions of the College and Department in contributing to their success. We previously were able to ascertain information about employment settings and titles of all of the 60 PhD CFH alumni from 2005-2014. From that group, we sent a survey to those for whom we were able to locate a current email address (N=49, 81.8%) to obtain not only more information about their professional positions and job tasks but also an evaluation of the role of the College and Department in contributing to their success as alumni.

Methods: The online alumni survey was developed through the survey software tool SurveyGizmo and contained 24 items that could be completed within 15 minutes. The survey included a mixture of closed-ended and open-ended questions focused on job titles and tasks; quantitative ratings of several items related to the role of the College and Department in alumni success (i.e. courses, leadership, culture); and qualitative perceptions of what best prepared the alumni for their current positions, what improvements could be made to the CFH doctoral program, and what advice they would give to future PhD graduates. Survey respondents also had the opportunity to indicate whether they were interested in developing a video of themselves describing their position and the contributions of the College and Department to their growth as a professional that would be posted on the CFH website. Graduates’ email addresses were acquired through social media and College and Department feedback and records. To address ease of use, a pilot test was conducted whereby six recipients were invited to participate on May 7th and again on May 13th. Ease of use and understanding were acceptable to pilot test participants, so no changes were made to the survey. The full group was sent the invitation to participate on May 16th and again on May 30th. The survey officially closed on June 6th.

Results: Thirty-four PhD alumni responded to the survey (69.4%), of which 26 (76.5%) completed all survey items. All respondents reported on their current positions: 16 (47.1%) were in academic settings, 14 (41.2%) in research settings, three (8.8%) in other settings, and one was (2.9%) uncategorized due to not yet being employed. Thirty-one PhD alumni reported on how their working time is distributed in their current position. Within each job setting (academic, research, and other), the average percentage of time respondents reported spending on research, teaching, administrative, and other tasks was calculated. Respondents in research positions reported spending most of their time (M=80.7%) on research-related tasks. Respondents in academic positions reported a fairly equal balance of time spent on teaching (M=44.9%) and research (M=36.3%) tasks. Respondents in other settings reported that their time was split among several types of tasks, with the plurality being spent on administrative tasks (M=33.3%). See Figure 1 for percentages of time spent in job tasks by job setting.
Quantitative findings (from 1=lowest to 5=highest) showed that the top four contributions of the College and Department overall for alumni success were the Major Professor (M=4.07), College Opportunities (M=3.93), Department Courses (M=3.86), and Department Support (M=3.81). Further ratings showed that College Support (M=3.61), Other Faculty (M=3.61), Department Leadership (M=3.56), and College Leadership (M=3.50) were also important contributors to success. Lower ranked items were College Courses (M=3.43), Department Culture (M=3.30) and Department Reputation (M=3.26). Because respondents may have had difficulty differentiating the roles of the College versus the Department in terms of contributions to success, these findings may reflect respondents’ overall opinions of their education at USF. See Figure 2 for the mean ratings for all items.
Qualitative findings showed that the themes related to what best prepared the alumni for their current positions included mentorship, research opportunities, assistantships and practical experiences, and teaching opportunities/requirements. Sample quotes are as follows:

- Mentorship (both major professor and other faculty):
  - Example: “Faculty mentorship and support (from select faculty) was wonderful and gave me the confidence I needed.”

- Research opportunities:
  - Example: “Practical hands on experience conducting research.”

- Assistantships:
  - Example: “Graduate assistantship opportunities provided practical experience that reinforced classroom learning.”
  - Example: “If I had not had a Graduate Research Associate position throughout my training program, I do not believe I would have been prepared.”

- Teaching opportunities/requirement:
  - Example: “Teaching experience at USF was valuable.”
Suggested modifications to the doctoral program produced the following themes: more training on practical/professional topics, less emphasis on coursework overall but more statistics training, and additional research-related exposure including opportunities to work with faculty on research and to publish their work. Sample quotes are as follows:

- Training on practical/professional topics:
  - Example: “Regular professional development skills trainings (i.e., how to network, marketing your skillset, CV development, professional behavior, public speaking skills, teaching skills, how to negotiate, innovative pathways to success, developing your teaching philosophy, developing your professional philosophy, etc. marketing yourself outside of academia, contract development, liaison skills, etc.). These are all vital to success as a professional.”
  - Many respondents made comments related to this theme.

- Less emphasis on coursework overall but more statistics courses:
  - Example: “For coursework that cannot be done away with, shift to more learner-centered learning. In general, there is way too much time spent in the classroom. Doctoral students need experiences--not more lectures.”
  - Example: “More high level statistical classes needed and experience running research projects.” (This quote also relates to the next theme.)

- More research-related exposure/opportunities:
  - Example: “Pushing students to do more independent (but supervised) research throughout the doc program. Providing more opportunities for students to write manuscripts.”
  - Example: “COPH professors need to be involved in more research that involves students.”

As for advice for future graduates, there were diverse comments ranging from general thoughts to specific suggestions. Comments centered around making sure the students have opportunities to do research; write grants; teach; publish; mentor junior students; have more than one faculty mentor; make use of workshops and other learning experiences on topics such as how to interview and how to be a successful academic; be flexible as they progress through their training; and allow the graduate program to not be a race but an opportunity to master the curricula and have opportunities for practice.

Twenty-six graduates (76.5%) responded to the question about recording a video. Of those who responded, 13 (50.0%) agreed to consider this opportunity. Videos will be representative of those alumni in academia, research, and other settings.

**Discussion:** The results of this survey add to the information collected previously on the professional titles and settings of the CFH doctoral graduates from 2005-2014. These earlier findings are posted on the CFH alumni link on the CFH website. Also, a map showing select locations of graduates accompanies the findings. This link and map were created to show the results of our efforts to learn about CFH PhD alumni.

In 2014-2015 major changes were made to the PhD program in CFH. The program itself has been revamped to allow for additional hours for focus area courses and more research courses the students can take to tailor to their particular research needs and successfully complete their dissertations. Also, the Doctoral Advisory Committee (DAC) was created where doctoral students have the opportunity to meet and plan Lunch and Learn sessions that cover many of the items described above related to
building professional development skills. For example, a recent seminar series focused on research methods and various study designs. DAC also provides input to the Department leadership on curriculum, research, mentoring, and social activities that will allow for better communication between faculty and students. Additionally, senior PhD students now serve as mentors to junior PhD students, allowing for stronger connections between students.

We believe that through these changes we have addressed many of the suggestions of the alumni and will continue to work on other areas noted by the survey respondents. Surveys of our graduates will continue to be used to learn how the College and Department can improve to better meet students’ needs and prepare exemplary PhD alumni. This is especially true for assessment of our recent program changes to determine if identified needs are being met.