

MPH NEWSLETTER

Utah State University
College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences



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LETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT HEAD

Hello,

The best part of my job as Department Head of the Department of Nutrition, Dietetics and Food Sciences is getting to hear about all the great work going on in our individual programs. The Master of Public Health program is one of five graduate degrees in our department, and though it is our newest program, it is certainly making a mark!

The mission of the NDFS department is to enhance the quality of life and well-being of our constituents in Utah, the nation, and internationally through food and nutrition-related teaching, research, and outreach. Faculty and students in our MPH program help us reach this mission. A hallmark of our professional online MPH program is providing students with experiential and community-engaged opportunities that will strengthen their ability to lead in the area of public health. I am extremely proud of the faculty and students of our MPH program. They haven't let the circumstances of the day slow them down and together we have remained flexible, creative, and resilient in these challenging and uncertain times.

Here are some of the great things that have happened in our program this past year. For starters, growth in our program supported hiring a new full-time faculty member. Casey Coombs joined our MPH faculty in July of 2021. Casey has worked in the field of public health for over 15 years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Latin America, nutrition educator for Cornell Cooperative Extension in the state of New York, and as the assistant director for Utah's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education program known as Create Better Health. With the help of Casey, we've been able to expand our course offerings and offer additional one-on-one mentoring for our students. Faculty in our program really are top-notch! Dr. Mateja Savoie-Roskos received the 2021 Early Professional Achievement Award by the Society of Nutrition Education and Behavior. Our students are also accomplishing great things both in and outside of the classroom. McKayla Heaton won the Rocky Mountain Public Health Training Center Student Leader award and Sandra Quiroz Elizondo received the 2021 Academy of Nutrition and Dietetic Foundation Diversity Scholarship. In addition, Natalie Dalley, a 2021 Nutrition MPH graduate, received the 2021 Utah Philanthropy Day 2021 Heart and Hands Award for her work with the Five. 12 Foundation, a nonprofit organization, that provides backpacks full of food for students in need.



So, there you have it. Our MPH program is strong and growing. Our faculty and students are doing great things and I am excited to keep learning about the impact we are having on the health of people and communities across the globe! Despite the challenges at hand, the future is bright. Bring it on 2022!

Sincerely,

Dr. Heidi Wengreen
Professor; Head of the Department of
Nutrition, Dietetics, and Food Science

Faculty Spotlight

Zhongde Wang, PhD

Zhongde Wang is an ADVS professor who primarily focuses on research endeavors in genetics and public health related issues such as metabolic syndromes, cancer, infectious diseases, and aging. He is particularly interested in how genetics and the interactions between genetics and lifestyle contribute to the development of human disease.

Professor Wang's research focuses on establishing genome engineering techniques, such as CRISPR/Cas-mediated gene-editing in non-conventional laboratory animal species, including the golden Syrian hamster, guinea pig, several species in the genus of *Peromyscus*, and naked mole rat to develop novel genetically engineered animal models to study human diseases. Each animal model species offers unique advantages over the mouse and rat in modeling certain human diseases. For example, both the golden Syrian and human, but not the mouse nor rat, carry a gene called CETP (cholesteryl ester transfer protein) which plays a central role in cholesterol metabolism, making the hamster an authentic model to study human dyslipidemia. Another example is that, as the naked mole rat (NMR) has exceptional longevity (they can live over 30 years of age!) and never develop cancer, it is an excellent model to study aging and cancer. So far, his lab has developed the world's first genetically engineered models in the hamster, guinea pig and *Peromyscus*, some of which have been widely used by laboratories in several countries.

As a professor in the dept. of ADVS, he is very excited about the scientific discoveries made in the lab and enjoys working with students. Dr. Wang believes as our understanding of human health and disease constantly evolves with new scientific insights, students benefit tremendously when they are involved in laboratory research and develop the skills (and habit) to read original scientific publications. He currently teaches ADVS 6060 Genetics of Metabolic Syndromes which a requirement for Veterinary MPH students and has mentored Veterinary MPH students in previous years.

Professor Wang's favorite activities at USU are his research and interactions with students. He also loves gardening and thinks the gardening classes and other resources offered by USU Extension are fantastic. He, of course, loves Aggie ice cream!



Fall 2021 Graduates

Congratulations to our fall 2021 graduates!

Rachel Sharber



Rachel will be graduating this fall with her MPH in Nutrition. During her education at Utah State she worked as a COVID-19 contact tracer and used that position to create a project that compared COVID-19 rates and public health defense mechanisms in college communities between Oklahoma and Utah. She has taken a job at the Department of Defense as a nutritional educator and will be using her MPH to work on health promotion at the Tinker Air Force Base.

McKayla Heaton



McKayla is our featured spotlight student for this newsletter. She is graduating this fall with her MPH in Nutrition. Read all about the great work she is doing on the next page!

Maren Haroldson

Maren is graduating this fall with her MPH in Veterinary Public Health.

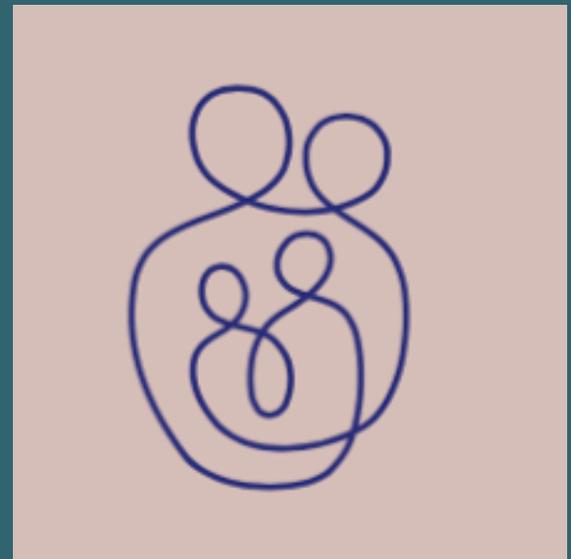
Student Spotlight

McKayla Heaton

McKayla is in the MPH Nutrition program. Her primary reason for choosing this program is her love for nutrition science. She completed her undergraduate degree in human nutrition at Southern Utah University and then discovered that USU's MPH program would be a perfect way to combine her interest in public health and passion for nutrition. For her master's project, she helped initiate and manage a community garden for refugee families. McKayla was in charge of finding a garden plot (she was able to do that through partnering with another local organization), organizing volunteer efforts to clear the area, coordinating refugee families and planting, maintaining the garden over the season, and planning garden-related activities.

McKayla's project was done with Utah Valley Refugees (UVR), a non-profit organization in Provo, UT aimed at serving refugees in Utah County. UVR provides educational, legal, and social resources for refugees to promote self-reliance and build a strong refugee community. Once McKayla found out about UVR, she wanted to be a part of their mission. Her family had a garden when she was growing up and she always wanted to have one of her own so, this was a perfect opportunity to help an organization that McKayla could support while getting to oversee a project she was passionate about.

Ultimately, the goals of McKayla's project were to provide access to fresh and healthy foods, strengthen the refugee and volunteer community, and promote self-reliance. As part of their future efforts, McKayla received the Rocky Mountain Public Health Training Center Student Leaders stipend and is in the process of applying for a small grant through the Utah Public Health Association to fund further efforts for the garden in the coming year.



Student Spotlight c.

Though they had a late start to the garden, it ended up being really well received by the refugee families that participated. To celebrate the end of the season, they had a potluck with the families and all of them expressed their appreciation for the garden. Some even want to expand to a bigger location next year, which is an option the program has looked into if funding permits.

McKayla is particularly interested in public health nutrition for global health. Overall, her main interests include helping people live healthier lifestyles, whether that be through nutrition education, creating corporate wellness programs, or non-profit organization work.

One of the most important things for McKayla when she thinks about her career, is working with an organization that aligns with her values and focuses on helping populations have access to healthier living. She would love to work in a global health setting or with minority groups in a local area. She has applied to the Peace Corps where she would likely work as a health volunteer for HIV/AIDS in Botswana. McKayla also really likes the land grant university system and has considered a career in public health or nutrition education.

Having her MPH will be a great help to reaching her career goals by providing her with learning experience and resources that she'll be able to apply in myriad career options. Completing this degree has opened up her career options more than she ever expected. She is excited for the different options she has with her degree and is grateful for what she has learned in the program. McKayla's MPH will contribute to her career directly, especially with the skills in grant writing, program planning, project evaluation, data analysis, and policy implementation. These and many other skills make her excited and hopeful to jump into the world of public health.



Partnering Organization



Natalie Dalley is a registered dietitian that works for the Five. 12 Foundation which assisted her in graduating with a Nutrition MPH in the Spring of 2021 from USU. Natalie's responsibilities for the foundation include write grants; plan programs and projects; and collaborate with local organizations, school districts, and other stakeholders. The USU MPH Nutrition program prepared her to perform these tasks more effectively. The practical experiences required by the course work coupled with a greater understanding of public health and community nutrition challenges increased her ability and confidence to manage Five. 12 well.

Five. 12 combats local food insecurity. They pack around 2000 weekend food bags weekly for Kindergarten through 6th graders at 45 schools. The food bags are sent home with food insecure students on Friday to provide adequate nourishment so the students can return to school Monday morning ready to learn. Elementary school teachers, staff, and administrators identify children who will benefit; 50 - 75 volunteers join them every Wednesday night for a high energy, fun-filled hour to fill the food bags and put them in bins; and additional volunteers drive the bins to the elementary schools for Friday delivery. The Five. 12 founders and primary funders are a generous family who desire to take care of their neighbors. Natalie is grateful to be part of this awesome organization.

Natalie's advise to MPH students is to DREAM BIG! The scope and reach of public health work changes lives. The world has enough to spare, enough knowledge, enough food, enough opportunities, enough funding. Inequitable distribution of resources is the problem. However, that is where the fun starts. It's like solving a puzzle and connecting the pieces one by one. Public health people are problem solvers. Meet challenges with confidence there is a solution. Gather others, collaborate, and improve the health and wellbeing of others through your contributions. Work hard and dream big!

Those at the Five. 12 are interested in expanding and growing. They are happy to collaborate with USU to provide MPH program opportunities. They would like to welcome MPH students with developed program ideas that will improve the health and wellbeing of K-6th graders in Utah. Students should contact Natalie if they are interested in practical program experience with Five 12 Foundation.

natalie@five12.org
801-602-8306



Upcoming Events

Society for Public Health Education Annual Conference

Date: March 22-25, 2022

[Click Here to Register](#)

The SOPHE conference will be virtual this year but will have people attending from a wide variety of health related fields. This will be a great continuing education and networking opportunity.



Utah Public Health Association Annual Conference

Date: March 22-24, 2022

The Utah Public Health Association annual conference will be a virtual event that we encourage students, alumni, and faculty to be a part of.

UPHA is also accepting abstract applications for presentations and posters for the 2022 virtual conference. The deadline to submit abstracts is February 1, 2022. [Find the abstract application HERE.](#)



Utah Public Health Association

Don't Forget to Follow Us!

Be the first to hear about MPH program updates by following our social media handles! This is a great way to stay up to date on program changes, class highlights, public health events, and potential job opportunities.

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