GWSPH Fellowship Panel Q&A

Q: What are the challenges that you experienced when applying for Fellowships & what suggestions do you have for those who are applying?

A: Holly Crowe, Presidential Management Fellowship: Apply for a lot of things and do not give up hope. The PMF application process generally begins Oct/Nov with online applications. To begin you will write essays, biographic information, & do an online personality assessment. After that process there is one round of cuts. The personal interviews are in DC and begin around March. The semi-final round is a bit intimidating. The top things they look for are how you work in teams & integrity. There are 500 candidates that make it to finalist status in May: This is when you will look to secure your final appointment. “Don’t put all of your eggs in the PMF basket.” In other words, depending on what is going on in the government at the time, it may be tough to get a PMF appointment, so be sure to not solely rely on PMF. Relax and be yourself and keep in mind the qualities that they want.

A: Kate Stigi, CSTE Applied Epidemiology Fellowship: Soon you will be able to look at the billets and projects/locations that they have available. There are multiple program areas within EPI. My advice would be to stay open minded. There are so many projects and locations. The application pool is so large they dwindle it down to 40 or so. Everything is due by January. The most challenging thing is to make sure you get all of your application materials in on time; to include letters of reference. The 40 applicants they narrow it down to are alerted to go to Atlanta, GA for an interview. After this, you start the matching process where you talk to the individual sites. You generally start in July/August. I would encourage you if you are interested in government positions to start applying now. The same goes for state jobs. It’s not too early by any means. Another piece of advice would be to arm yourself with as many technical courses as you can. Get as much technical experience to set yourself apart from others.

A: Lydia Orth, David A. Winston Health Policy Fellowship: There were 50 applicants last year. They selected 6 to go to DC for panel interviews. We went to dinner with fellow competitors, as well as previous fellows, the night before the interviews to talk about the interview process and what to expect. The interview included 5 panelists shooting off different Health Policy questions about leadership and why you wanted the fellowship. There are only two fellows selected each year and you are notified the same day as the interviews. The application is open now and closes October 16, 2015. The fellowship also gives out scholarship funding for first year MPH students.

A: Krista Mizenko, ASPPH/NHTSA Public Health Fellowship: The timelines are different depending on the agency. Generally they close anytime between Dec & Feb. Interviews start Mar/Apr timeline. First there is a phone interview, a one on one, and then panel fire interview process. It’s not a very broad fellowship so they have specific topic areas. You need to have the right timing and the right interest to match everything together. You will get a generous amount of professional development experience.

Q: Are there specific things students should think about when crafting their essays or writing samples?
A: Krista Mizenko, ASPPH: I used three strong points about myself and then crafted a story between everything so it’s consistent and concise. “It’s more creative and more story based.”

A: Lydia Orth, David A. Winston: Telling a story that sticks out to the interviewers will help them remember you. I recommend having everyone read it because there might be something that you missed. Having fresh eyes on your writing is important.

A: Kate Stigi, CSTE: With EPI you are talking to scientists so I don’t know about the story route. Cut to the chase, what sets you apart, be concise. When you read over the billets, how do you feel about it, why are you passionate about it? Be sure to get your essay in early. With letters of reference, sometimes it helps if you ghost the letter a bit. Not write the letter yourself, but have key points they should include in it.

A: Holly Crowe, PMF: If you have to import your essay, my advice is to have it as a word document and save it often. For the PMF interview, they paid close attention to my essay. So make sure you can speak to it when they ask.

Q: What are two or three skills/qualities that you feel are necessary that have supported your success in your fellowship?

A: Holly Crowe, PMF: There are two things for the federal government that are particularly important. One is adaptability. Be able to be someone that can roll with the punches if something doesn’t go the way that you thought it would. The second, especially for fellows, is confidence in your ability to be able to speak to anyone at any level. Make sure that you are prepared and informed about what you are talking about. Confidence will take you really far. Realize you know what you’re talking about and if you don’t, admit that you don’t and that will get you a lot of respect.

A: Kate Stigi, CSTE: My three skills are commitment, flexibility, & enthusiasm. GW is preparing you with amazing technical skills and the education component. Don’t box yourself into a corner, you don’t have to know where you’re going to be in the next ten years. You will probably have two mentors, a primary and a secondary mentor. There are also training portions. They are teaching you and shaping you. With enthusiasm, be willing to wear a million hats.

A: Lydia Orth, David A. Winston: Being able to write well and be concise are particularly important in policy. Policy wants you to create a one pager on a very complex policy issue. Being able to boil it down to the key points is very crucial. The health policy courses and memo writing courses here at GW will really pay off. Keeping up with your contacts, such as classmates, fellow interns, and colleagues is helpful. You never know who may think of you when they have an opportunity available.

A: Krista Mizenko, ASPPH: Being able to perform with consistency is important. Working in government you need to be adaptive because things are always changing. Communication is very important as well. You have to be able to translate skills across the different departments.

Q: What do your potential career trajectories look like?
A: Holly Crowe, PMF: Pro tip: If you are a finalist for PMF and you are looking at different opportunities, be sure to check if the opportunity includes a transition to full time employment after your fellowship. It’s an easier transition than being left adrift. The federal government career ladder is called the GS schedule based on education and experience. Negotiate your entry point salary if possible. Generally you will start at a GS 9 for a Master’s degree and a GS 11 for PhD. You get moved up after your first year and then again after your second year if you get moved to a full time permanent position. Part of the PMF program is to do rotations your second year. You spend a couple of months at different agencies or offices within your agency. You can make more contacts this way and might be able to move offices if you see one that better fits you.

A: Kate Stigi, CSTE: The fellowship is very structured. You will build a database, do an outbreak investigation, and be involved in emergency preparedness. The fellows are well respected. The majority of folks in the EPI program stayed at the local and state level.

A: Lydia Orth, David A. Winston: Our fellows have ended up everywhere. Lobbying, federal government, the white house, and teaching at Georgetown University. Most do tend to stay in Health Policy. The fellow gets to tailor their experience to what they want to learn. There is not really a standard path.

A: Krista Mizenko, ASPPH: There is no clear trajectory. A lot of former ASPPH fellows have remained in federal government. For me, I am leaning more towards global safety, more foundation based.

Q: What is your best career advice?

A: Krista Mizenko, ASPPH: Take the leadership course at GWSPH. We were able to meet with people on the micro to macro level. It was interesting to get different perspectives from everyone we met.

A: Lydia Orth, David A. Winston: Keeping up with your contacts. I use LinkedIn to keep up with everyone.

A: Kate Stigi, CSTE: Salaries with fellowships can be scary. Don’t be discouraged. It’s not going to lock you in at that salary. With CSTE it’s a stipend. A fellowship is the best bridge between grad school and really getting out there.

A: Holly Crowe, PMF: I believe that linear career paths are a thing of our parent’s generations. Nowadays, it’s not that you go to one company and work there for the rest of your life. Fellowships are a great way to test something out and get the career and professional development that you want.

Q: What have you found was the background of other fellows in PMF?
A: Holly Crowe, PMF: Everything, literally. I am one of three at the defense health agency; one has a PhD, one is in the Peace Corps, & I came right out of grad school. There are a lot of lawyers, federal contractors, and those who do not have government experience. Don’t be intimidated by not having experience in the government. They look for more general skills as opposed to a certain background.

Q: How did you manage applying for so many jobs and fellowships while going to school? Time management, health management, organization, etc.

A: Lydia Orth, David A. Winston: Spreadsheets. I had a crazy spreadsheet going. I also met with a lot of current fellows in the positions to hire. Kept my feelers out to see who was hiring and when. I was working full time and going to night school so I was doing it mostly on the weekends.

A: Holly Crowe, PMF: A master excel spreadsheet & kept track of deadlines. I tried to limit myself to two job applications a day just so I wouldn’t spend five hours in front of my computer and forget to live for a couple months. I’m not going to deny it, it was hard. I remember crying saying, “I am never going to get a job.” I searched everything, GW Jobs Board, all the listservs, etc. Don’t give up.

A: Kate Stigi, CSTE: I didn’t go too crazy, but I am also super optimistic. I just found what I was interested in, honed in and did my best on those applications. I was always looking, but I was so set on this fellowship. Know what you are eligible for. I did go to some interviews that were mortifying. I went to a few interviews that I knew I wasn’t qualified for. Try to stick with your practicum if you can. As a fellow, I kept doing research with the FDA.

Catherine Goetz: Make sure you have a compelling and crafting story. You want to be able to answer the question “tell me about yourself” with confidence. What are your current skill sets? What did you gain from your practicum and how will they apply as contributions for your fellowship program.

For more information on the Fellowships discussed, please visit their websites:

ASPH/NHTSA Public Health Fellowship - https://fellowships.aspph.org/programs/details.cfm?programID=8

CSTE Applied Epidemiology Fellowship - http://www.cste.org/?page=Fellowship

David A. Winston Health Policy Fellowship - http://www.winstonfellowship.org/

Presidential Management Fellowship - http://www.pmf.gov/