Occupational Injury Prevention: Student & Alumni Profiles

Leslie Nordgren

Prior to entering the OIPRT program, I earned a bachelor's degree in dental public health and a master of public health degree in epidemiology at the University of Minnesota. At the time I entered the program, I was working for Allina Hospitals and Clinics, where I was the patient safety project manager for 42 medical clinics and 10 hospitals. Through this work, I was introduced to the study of human factors, as it relates to designing work processes that preclude injuries and errors. I became very interested in methods of averting injuries in both patients and medical staff, and I wanted to learn more about the study of injury prevention and control.

What made you interested in the field of occupational injury prevention?

In my work at the hospital and clinic setting, I became aware of the hazards surrounding the work environment, especially in the clinical setting. Many of the injuries suffered by the staff were extremely severe, with long lasting adverse effects on their careers and quality of life. I also became aware that the financial costs to the organization were extremely high. Occupational injuries to healthcare personnel are also one of many factors that contribute to increasing health-care costs.

What made you choose the University of Minnesota?

I knew that the University of Minnesota was very strong in the area of research. I was also very excited to find that there was a PhD program that specialized in occupational injury prevention research with courses available in human factors design and evaluation.

What type of job would you like to find upon completion of the program?

I would like to continue the work that I am doing in the area of prevention of injuries to workers in a clinical setting, with the implementation of research-based injury prevention interventions. This entails using principles of human factors and contextual work design to create work processes that prevent injuries, with evaluation of injury rates both before and after applying new interventions. My goals in this work are to streamline and design injury events out of the work process and to conduct research to evaluate the effectiveness of the work process changes.

What would you say to a student considering the program?

You'll receive a tremendous amount of support from both faculty and fellow students in this program, as
well as a valuable hands-on education in cutting-edge research methodology. The interdisciplinary approach within this program provides insight into the many possibilities that may be considered when interacting with public health professionals who have a wide range of expertise.

Katie Schofield

Prior to starting the OIPRT program, I earned a bachelor's degree in Exercise Science and a master’s degree in Environmental Health and Safety (MEHS), both from the University of Minnesota Duluth. Immediately after graduating with my master’s degree, I worked as a graduate research assistant for the University of Minnesota – Duluth (UMD) and helped the Environmental Health and Safety Department develop formal indoor air quality standards and protocols. Then, I started my current job at The Builders Group of Minnesota, a self-insured workers’ compensation fund, where I work as a loss control consultant for over 200 construction companies.

What made you interested in the field of occupational injury prevention?

When I was an undergraduate, a student from the UMD MEHS program came to talk to my class. She explained what the whole “safety and injury prevention” idea was about, and how it applied out in the real world. I was immediately interested and applied for that program the next year. Once I graduated from the program and started working at my current job, I soon realized how important safety is in industry (especially construction), and how devastating, expensive, and all too common occupational injuries are. This has motivated me to continue my education to better understand and prevent occupational injury.

What made you choose the University of Minnesota?

While looking for potential PhD programs, I found the exact one that complemented my past educational experience, current work, and future goals, and it was right in my backyard! Based on my positive experience at UMD, I knew I couldn't go wrong staying in the University of Minnesota system, especially with its excellent reputation for academics, faculty, and research. When I met the current faculty and students on a visit I was completely sold.

What type of job would you like to find upon completion of the program? [If you have already commenced a position, please elaborate upon that.]

I really enjoy working in the construction safety field and directly with contractors and their employees. I think it gives you an immediate chance to make an impact on a personal level. I definitely want to continue this type of work, and eventually use this knowledge in a teaching or academic position.
What would you say to a student considering the program?

From Day 1 of the application process, I felt that everyone in this program, division, and school was on my side. The faculty is approachable and generous with their time, the fellow students are great, the classes are challenging, and programs can be tailored for individual interests. The U of M has so many academic, professional, and social opportunities to offer, and the Twin Cities is an excellent place in which to live and work.

Christopher J. Drucker

Prior to enrolling in the OIPRT program, I received both my B.S. and MS from the University at Buffalo, The State University of New York. My degrees are in Industrial & Systems Engineering with my master degree concentrating in Human Factors/Ergonomics (HF/E) engineering. So far my life has been strictly academics; therefore I do not have any relevant work experience to share with you at this point in time.

What made you interested in the field of occupational injury prevention?

I was always interested in the science, math and medical fields growing up. Somehow, I wanted to mix all three interests together and it wasn’t until my years as an undergraduate student that I discovered the field of HF/E. In a nut shell, HF/E is the science of understanding the human-machine interface. Utilizing principles in science and math, and then adapting them to the human body to understand how the human operates biomechanically, physiologically and psychologically allows me to satisfy all three fields at once. My interests further evolved into the field of occupational injury prevention after I spent some time conducting HF/E-based research on workstations. It was intriguing to know my research would be used directly to help the workers by reducing the risk for injury.

What made you choose the University of Minnesota?

Choosing this university was not that hard of a decision. The University of Minnesota’s School of Public Health is one of the top schools in the nation. It also has exactly what I was looking for – a research-oriented Ph.D. program in occupational injury prevention that would allow me to integrate my HF/E background with public health practices and research.

What type of job would you like to find upon completion of the program?

Upon completion of the program, there are several paths that I can see myself venturing off into. One path would be to get a commission in the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) as an environmental health officer conducting injury prevention and education, as well as epidemiological surveillance. Another
path would be working for a government agency such as the Department of Health and Human Services, specifically for the CDC, NIOSH or NCIPC as an injury epidemiologist.

Though these paths are what I would like to pursue upon completion of the program, they are not my final destination. After obtaining these experiences, I would like to return to academia as a faculty member conducting research in the field of injury prevention and HF/E-based epidemiology in addition to educating and mentoring our future researchers and practitioners.

**What would you say to a student considering the program?**

Though at the time I am writing this (2 months into the program), I am already truly amazed with the university, the school, the division, the program and the people all around. When I was offered an invitation to visit the university to meet with the faculty, staff and students, I received a wealth of information about what to expect. As to date, everything that I was told has held true.

If you are considering the program, contact the faculty and students who are in the program to obtain information that cannot be found on the website and go from there.

**Chia Wei**

I majored in Public Health as an undergraduate at the Kaohsiung Medical University in my home country of Taiwan. Before I came to the University of Minnesota for my master’s degree, I was working with an Occupational Medicine Physician as a research assistant (involved as an interviewer) and I have also worked as a clinical study coordinator in the Cardiology Division at the Kaohsiung Medical University Hospital.

**What made you interested in the field of occupational injury prevention?**

I took a class called "Industrial Hygiene," where I was introduced to the field of occupational injury, and I knew this was a field I was interested in. What furthered my interest in this field was how close it hit home to me. I have several relatives who are farmers and construction workers in Taiwan and this field directly impacts their daily lives. I realized that a large majority of people who are exposed to high-risk work are typically the only source of income for their families and are paid at lower wages — and this peaked my curiosity. One of the things I will work toward with my furthered education in this field is helping reduce injury of those who are at high risk through educating them on what I learn.

**What made you choose the University of Minnesota?**
I chose the University of Minnesota for its training program for Occupational Injury, which is supported by the Midwest Center for Occupational Health and Safety. With this reputable source backing up the program, combined with the vast amount of literature published from the U of M, I knew this was the institution for me—despite the frigid weather in the winter, which is so very different from the tropical lands of Taiwan.

What type of job would you like to find upon completion of the program?

Because I have realized that the majority of injuries occur when people do not pay attention to their own work safety or there is a gap in their proper education on the topic, I want to be involved in the communication and education of occupational hazards. To stress that injury prevention and education go hand-in-hand will be at the heart of my future work.

What would you say to a student considering the program?

I would let them know that I strongly recommend it because of the wide array of courses the Occupational Prevention program offers. From epidemiology to injury prevention, to human factors and work analysis to the plethora of seminars, everyone will find a niche area to focus on if they are interested in the material. Each course provides us with critical and informative knowledge about occupational injury prevention, and I do not think it’s taught better anywhere else.

Alumni Profiles

Kathleen F. Carlson

My undergraduate education was in Biology, and I did lab research for several years in Plant Pathology, Molecular Biology, and Animal Science. While I loved being a research scientist, I wanted to do work that could have a greater impact on population health. A subsequent experience working in community health in Mexico City confirmed what my lab mentors had been telling me: Public Health was my ticket.

What made you interested in the field of occupational injury prevention?

Living and working in Mexico made me acutely aware of the dangers faced every day by workers, particularly among members of marginalized populations such as new immigrants. Though the issues are vastly different in the US, some populations – migrant and seasonal farm laborers, for example – still bear the brunt of occupational health hazards.

I was fascinated by the ways in which culture, history, politics, and economics intertwine to generate this
unfair social stratification, and I wanted in some way to contribute to safer workplaces for all. This idea of equal access to healthy environments, occupational and otherwise, is a core pillar of the Occupational Injury Prevention Research Training Program and, more generally, the Division of Environmental Health Sciences.

**What made you choose the University of Minnesota?**

I interviewed at several leading schools of public health before making my decision. The University of Minnesota School of Public Health is renowned for its excellent faculty, rigorous curriculum, and cutting-edge research. A major factor for me, though, was that Minnesota was also a very friendly and supportive place to be. Those that I met truly believed they could contribute to the betterment of society, and I felt a strong sense of collaboration rather than competition.

Once enrolled, I found that these were indeed strong principles not only in our program, but throughout the Division of Environmental Health Sciences and the School of Public Health. There is no comparison to the camaraderie I felt with my fellow students and with faculty during (and since) my training. Through all the challenges of completing coursework, research, and a dissertation, this network of friends and mentors, and the positive, supportive environment we were in, were absolutely my mainstay.

**What type of job would you like to find upon completion of the program? [If you have already commenced a position, you can elaborate upon that.]**

I thrive in the academic environment, and would love to continue conducting research in injury epidemiology, prevention, and control, while also teaching and mentoring students. Upon graduating in August, 2006, I made a difficult choice between an NIH NRSA postdoctoral fellowship studying social determinants of injury, and a VA Health Service Research and Development fellowship examining polytrauma and blast-related injuries in new veterans. The opportunity to work with veterans, conduct more applied work, and extend my learning in health services and rehabilitation research, ultimately led me to the VA position.

**What would you say to a student considering the program?**

First, let’s address the weather! As a native of the Pacific Northwest, the Midwestern climate and the infamous winters were top on my mind when choosing where to relocate. I was told at the time, though – and can now attest to this fact – that Minnesotans do whatever they can to embrace their climate and find ways to enjoy every season. It’s been an adventure, to say the least. Minneapolis and St. Paul are fantastic cities, with enormous parks and lakes, deep-rooted culture, intellectual pursuits, and a nightlife to boot!
I would also say to choose a program and faculty that is conducting, or will support your conducting, research that truly interests you – you’ll be doing a lot of it! Find an academic environment in which you fit – one that motivates you, stimulates your interests, pushes you to the limits intellectually. Get rolling right away with building a network of friends, mentors, and colleagues.

Graduate school can be extremely challenging and has a way of making you question your intentions, your passions, who you are and who you want to be. There is no alternative to a great network for keeping you focused, fulfilled, and on track. Have fun!

Denise Feda

I received my bachelor’s degree from Saint Olaf College in Biology and Computer science and my master’s degree from the University of Minnesota in Environmental Health Sciences, with a focus on infectious disease epidemiology. Prior to enrolling in the program I worked at the Minnesota Department of Health, and at the University of Minnesota in the Division of Epidemiology.

What made you interested in the field of occupational injury prevention?

As part of the first year Environmental Health Sciences curriculum, I took a class that covered a broad range of topics and was introduced to the field. I found it interesting and continued on to take the introduction to occupational health class. After that, I knew that the field was of interest to me and I asked about the program.

What made you choose the University of Minnesota?

I am from Minnesota and I love it here. The School of Public Health is an excellent place to study and there are numerous opportunities to connect with professionals in the field, especially with the Minnesota Department of Health.

What type of job would you like to find upon completion of the program?

I’d like to either become a professor or return to a government position either at the Minnesota Department of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or the World Health Organization.

What would you say to a student considering the program?

Come to visit and ask lots of questions.

Muree Larson-Bright
I have a BA in International Relations (University of Minnesota) and a MPH (University of New Mexico). I have had over fifteen years experience in social work, public health research, and state government.

**What made you interested in the field of occupational injury prevention?**

I love the challenge and opportunity offered by an inter-disciplinary field that draws on environmental, epidemiological, organizational, and social justice methods/issues.

**What made you choose the University of Minnesota?**

The School of Public Health was one of the top programs in the nation and one of the few that had an injury-related research track.

**What type of job would you like to find upon completion of the program?** (If you have already commenced a position, you can elaborate upon that.)

Since graduation in July 2006, I have been working as a data analyst with the State of Minnesota's Department of Human Services and plan to continue a career in state government.

**What would you say to a student considering the program?**

Being a student at the University of Minnesota is an incredible opportunity. I had excellent mentoring, supportive fellow students, and interesting coursework. My family has found Minnesota a great place to “be a family” – there are many parks, kid-oriented programs, and great schools. Career-wise, most valuable has been the opportunity to join an existing five-state agricultural injury project for my dissertation work.

**Starr Sage**

Prior to starting the PhD program in Injury Prevention, I completed a Masters degree in epidemiology. I also have a Bachelors degree in biology. Early in my graduate school career, I worked at the Minnesota Department of Health for several years. Since enrolling in the injury prevention program I have been actively involved as a research assistant on a large study that examines risk factors for work-related injury and violence against Minnesota's licensed educators.

**What made you interested in the field of occupational injury prevention?**

My interest in injury prevention was piqued during an undergraduate study abroad experience in Ghana,
West Africa. During my months in West Africa it became quite clear to me how significantly one's immediate environment can negatively impact their health. Across the country I saw how those working and living in excessively hazardous environments more frequently experienced serious injuries and even death.

In several instances I saw how workers were forced to use extremely outdated and hazardous machines and tools, that had been used and then imported from developed countries that had no further use for them. The negative impact of the hazardous working conditions was further compounded by a lack of access to sufficient post-injury medical care. After my experience in Africa, I decided that I wanted to be involved in work to reduce injury hazards by modifying the environments, both in the U.S. and abroad, in which we all work and live.

**What made you choose the University of Minnesota?**

The School of Public Health (SPH) at the University of Minnesota (U of M), is well-known for its world-class faculty, extensive curriculum, and research opportunities. Upon the completion of my masters studies at the U of M, I explored several other PhD programs before deciding to stay here. In exploring these programs, it became quite evident that the U of M's SPH was able to offer me above and beyond what I'd get at other institutions, in terms of research opportunities and the close personal relationships I'd develop with faculty members who are truly interested in my success.

**What type of job would you like to find upon completion of the program?**

Upon completion, I'd like to assume a faculty position. In this capacity I hope to be involved with both teaching and research. I've always thought that education is power, and I'd love to teach students, the next generation of public health professionals, and get them excited about the many opportunities in public health. In addition to teaching, I also have an interest in conducting research with the goal of reducing injuries in the communities most affected (i.e., low-income populations and communities of color).

**What would you say to a student considering the program?**

The SPH has many great research opportunities for you to pursue, so make sure you fully explore all of the potential opportunities and carefully select a faculty mentor to work closely with. Having a good relationship with your advisor is critical to your success! In addition to the numerous academic opportunities, the U of M is located in an exciting metropolitan community and should you decide to come here, there will be no shortage of social, cultural, and art events for you to explore while you're not studying!

**Quentin Williams**
Work, Work, Work was my experience prior to enrolling in the OIPRT program. I spent many years working in industry. My final industrial position was with a company that specialized in the development of commercial and Navy submarine batteries. While working I also earned a BS in Mechanical and Industrial Engineering from the University of Illinois.

What made you interested in the field of occupational injury prevention?

While working in battery manufacturing, I was severely burned by the molten lead and sulfuric acid. After this injury, surgery, and a huge dispute with management to protect my health and keep my job, I decided to become an engineer and learn how to design out these types of hazards; but it wasn't until I found public health that I have learned how to deal with these situations on a population level.

What made you choose the University of Minnesota?

This was one of my easiest decisions to make. I traveled across the country in search of a program that would allow me to maintain my engineering skills while applying them to public health and the only school that offered that combination with a strong mentoring component was the University of Minnesota. So when I received the offer, I gladly accepted.

What type of job would you like to find upon completion of the program? [If you have already commenced a position, you can elaborate upon that.]

Upon completion of the program I would be very interested in working with an agency like the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health or the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control where I can be involved in intervention research, focused on sustaining and improving worker health and safety.

What would you say to a student considering the program?

If you are interested in being involved in research that has a potential to impact the community in a truly beneficial way, then this is the program for you. With a mix of coursework in epidemiology, biostatistics, safety engineering, and psychology coupled with public health research, one is given the right foundation to become a competent and successful researcher.

Deborah Merchant Langner

What was your educational and relevant work experience prior to enrolling in the OIPRTP program? Under the mentorship of Dr. Lorann Stallones at Colorado State University, I earned my MS in Environmental Health, and then continued on as a program manager on one of her research projects addressing injury among
Colorado farm families. An opportunity arose doing similar research with the occupational health unit at the Minnesota Department of Health, and I moved to Minneapolis to direct that project. Within a month I met Dr. Gerberich, because you can’t do injury research in Minnesota without knowing Sue. I enrolled in the OIPRTP program while continuing to work at the Health Department.

What made you interested in the field of occupational injury prevention? Born and raised on the water, I spent a few years as a commercial longline fisherman in the North Atlantic. “The Deadliest Catch” is not overly sensationalized; I worked long hours, often under adverse conditions, with each trip bringing new challenges. My Captain was extremely safety-conscious, and he taught us all to stop and think before each and every step. This experience gave me a great appreciation for how the seemingly simplest alteration in an activity can make an enormous difference, and how quickly a life-changing injury can occur if actions aren’t thought through fully.

What made you choose the University of Minnesota? It was down the street from work—at a brisk jog I could go from my office desk to a classroom desk in five minutes. The flexibility of the program, which allowed me to take what I was learning in the classroom and translate it into activities in a world-class health department, was an experience like no other.

What would you say to a student considering the program? The opportunities in this program are limited only by your imagination. Go for it! Dream big, ask questions, take chances, talk to everyone, and you will learn more than you ever thought possible.