

Allison Kuipers

Background:

I actually got my undergraduate degree here at the University of Pittsburgh. I have a Bachelor of Science in Biology with minors in Theater Performance and Chemistry. I began working at the Graduate School of Public Health in my second year of my undergraduate studies. I worked as an hourly student employee and lab assistant in the molecular epidemiology lab of Dr. Joseph Zmuda. I had initially planned on going to medical school after undergraduate, but after working in the field of epidemiology, on the molecular end of research, I decided to pursue a graduate degree in Epidemiology at a Public Health institution. It was partially experience and partially convenience that led me to deciding to stay here at Pittsburgh for my graduate degree. First, I was already working with Dr. Zmuda on multiple projects and manuscripts and was involved with large cohort studies analyses, such as the Men with Osteoporosis Study (MrOS) and the Tobago Prostate Cancer Study, and had been given opportunities to present my research at multiple national meetings as an undergraduate. I already had a strong understanding of the available data, knew a lot of the faculty and other students and knew I would be able to jump right into my research with first-year, GSR funding assured here at Pitt. Secondly, it was more convenient to stay in Pittsburgh and be able to go directly into a PhD program without a Masters than to go to Harvard or Yale, the other public health schools that accepted me, and have to spend money out-of-pocket for a Masters degree first. So, I ended up continuing my education here at the University of Pittsburgh and have not regretted this decision!

Areas of Interest and Dissertation Work:

This is an unofficial report of my proposed dissertation research since I haven't technically met with my committee to discuss it but... I will be studying the genetic correlates of carotid intima-media thickness in Afro-Caribbeans from the Tobago Family Study. This study consists of eight, large multi-generational families residing on the Caribbean island of Tobago. I, along with Genevieve Woodard, have collected data on common carotid artery intima-media thickness from ultrasound scans as part of a new cardiovascular disease research aim in this cohort study. We also have data on coronary risk factors including anthropometry, lifestyle, lipid levels, glucose and insulin. Using these variables, I plan to investigate genetic correlates of carotid intima-media thickness in these families using both genome-wide linkage data and candidate gene studies with adjustment for traditional risk factors.

Remote Training Experience:

I have been trained and certified to read the ultrasound images for the 4-image carotid artery intima-media thickness scans at the University's Ultrasound Research Laboratory. While this group is associated with Pitt, it is not something restricted to the department of Epidemiology or School of Public Health. (Frankly, I'm not sure if this counts as remote training... if not, I don't really have any training experience, yet, and am not sure what is planned for that?)

Perspectives on the Program:

This program is a great experience for working with a large group of researchers in various aspects of cardiovascular disease. There are regular meetings and journal clubs so that everyone can get together and hear about new techniques and advances in the field, which is very helpful as it is all too easy to get caught up in our own specific section of research. Also, we are encouraged to attend national meetings, such as the American Heart Association Epi Council, in order to network and meet influential investigators. This focus on meeting people and getting exposure is an added bonus of this program because the entire focus is not within the school and department in our own research but to really get exposed to the entire cardiovascular disease field, as a whole. Therefore, not only are we potentially more prepared for future work but we get the opportunity to share our own research with outside senior investigators and get input from them, on top of the support we get from persons within this department.

Advice to Current and Prospective Students:

My advice is to have an open mind when you start your graduate studies with regard to your research plan. You may come into the program having an idea of exactly what you want to study, and for some people that may be what happens. But for many students, different opportunities arise during your first years here and you may wind up in an area of research that wasn't your original plan. Also, as is often the case, you may have one area of research that you stay within, but your ultimate proposal and dissertation will change frequently as you advance through your analyses. While, you need to try to have a specific goal, if you ever intend on graduating, being open to compromise and change will increase your knowledge-base and make your time here the most effective it can be.

Future Plans and Opportunities:

After I graduate, I will probably attempt to get a post-doctoral position that will help me to further my work on the genetics and molecular epidemiology of chronic disease. I am open to positions in academia and through the NIH where there are a lot of very exciting programs using molecular data to study disease. I would like to get involved in genome-wide genotyping and/or sequencing and new techniques for understanding the functionality of the genome *in vivo*, in an attempt to understand the underlying etiology of the diseases that have a profound effect on the morbidity and mortality in the general population.