

# **Sasakawa Nursing Fellowship Progress Report 2024-2025**

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## 1. Overview and Purpose

Here I summarize my academic progress and personal experiences starting from mid-August 2024. This is my first opportunity to attend graduate school, where I aim to learn about the barriers to illness prevention and the reasons behind behaviors that overlook available resources for better health. To achieve these goals, I am pursuing an MPH program in the Department of Sociomedical Sciences at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. This program will also help shape my professional goals in a public health career. To acquire the necessary knowledge and skills, I have set the following academic goals for my first year.

## 2. Academic Goals

- A) Understand the social factors acting as barriers to illness prevention
- B) Cultivate how to promote behavioral changes for illness prevention in community settings
- C) Develop fundamental skills in research from quantitative and qualitative aspects
- D) Gain knowledge on the current U.S. health systems compared with Japanese health systems
- E) Narrow down the area of interest for practical training

## 3. Academic Progress

### A) Understand the social factors acting as barriers to illness prevention

During the first fall semester of our four-semester program at the Mailman School of Public Health, I studied the fundamental social aspects of American health, economics, politics, culture, and history. The primary focus was on the United States, particularly examining health disparities within the historical context of New York City, specifically Manhattan. This was a novel experience for me.

I learned that in urban areas of New York, some individuals face economic burdens and prejudice due to discriminatory practices by real estate agents, such as redlining, which stem from urban development. These practices have lasting effects today, creating underlying factors that impede health. People who are born and raised in areas experiencing discrimination often encounter limited employment opportunities, leading to poverty. This poverty discourages investment in education for the next generation, restricts access to health resources, and perpetuates further poverty through reduced job prospects, creating a challenging cycle that is hard to break.

While adopting healthy exercise and dietary habits can serve as preventative measures for residents to combat disease, structural socioeconomic barriers hinder access to health resources, and individual efforts alone are insufficient to effect change. This illustrates the social determinants of health in urban areas of New York City. Additionally, I learned that factors beyond individual control, such as immigration status and race, are closely linked to health outcomes across the United States.

In the spring semester of 2025, I am studying obesity countermeasures in the United

States. I discovered that various social factors contribute to obesity, including the media's promotion of unhealthy foods targeted at children, marketing techniques that place sweets and processed items in high-traffic areas inside stores, and the built environment, which can make it challenging to engage in physical activity and access healthy foods. Furthermore, I learned about various background factors within families, such as economic constraints and differences in knowledge about health, along with barriers that cannot be resolved by a single intervention.

The built environment, in particular, stands out as an area of interest. Urban planning and building design from a health perspective could help reduce barriers to disease prevention. However, interventions must consider the region from multiple perspectives, including the area's history, the involvement of local businesses, and the availability of transportation and green spaces. With this broader perspective, I hope to enhance my understanding of public health interventions.

B) Cultivate how to promote behavioral changes for illness prevention in community settings

In the Fall 2024 semester, I explored various health promotion methods. Although each method was introductory, many students actively supported the use of social networking services(SNS) as tools for behavior change during group discussions. For the digital native generation, sharing information via SNS is quick and accessible, making it a preferred option for reaching a larger audience. SNS not only disseminate information but also serve as educational tools. However, we must be cautious about potential biases that may arise from economic disparities, such as differences in Internet access and smartphone ownership. Despite these concerns, SNS has the advantage of providing timely and extensive information compared to traditional methods. Therefore, in the Spring 2025 semester, as a non-digital native, I am determined to evaluate the practicality of using SNS for health promotion and explore how it fits into modern lifestyles.

In the United States, the presence of Hispanic immigrants highlights the importance of providing support in Spanish, especially given the socio-economic challenges they often face. States with large immigrant populations have recognized that addressing language barriers is essential for effective health promotion. This issue is not unique to the United States. Japan is also experiencing population decline and aging, alongside an increase in the number of foreign residents. I believe that foreign immigrants and immigrant workers will become integral to Japanese society. As a result, language will pose challenges for both the Japanese and immigrants. I feel that the lessons learned from the United States on overcoming language barriers in health promotion will be invaluable for Japan in the future. I intend to maintain this perspective and explore ways to effectively respond to these challenges.

In the Spring 2025 semester, I am studying public health approaches to obesity, a widespread problem in the United States. I am considering factors from the individual level

to broader social structural aspects and contemplating preventive interventions for them. For example, to prevent obesity in schools, I learned that promoting healthy balanced meals can be achieved by placing salads and nutritious foods prominently at the beginning of lunch buffets while placing less nutritious options in less visible locations. This intervention is cost-effective, as it merely involves changing the arrangement of food. Additionally, I considered restrictions on food advertising and commercials aimed at children as potential media interventions, but I learned that implementing these interventions is challenging due to corporate profit motives and rights such as freedom of speech.

Regarding community and population-level approaches, I am focusing on methodologies in the course "Health Promotion Theory, Research, and Practice." I am learning methodologies that utilize people's emotions, such as fear and self-efficacy, and am practicing applying them using myself as an example of intervention. Each methodology has its advantages and disadvantages. During the spring semester, there will be a chance in which I will develop my own methodology, so I aim to combine the various methodologies I have learned thus far to design a method that minimizes disadvantages and effectively promotes behavioral change.

C) Develop fundamental skills in research from quantitative and qualitative aspects

In the fall semester of 2024, I learned both quantitative and qualitative research methods. It was my first experience with qualitative research, and I found the assignments both challenging and engaging. As for quantitative research methods, I had already learned the basics in nursing school, which allowed me to approach the class with some prior knowledge. However, learning about regression models was new to me and presented some difficulties.

In class, I completed assignments using output data from the statistical software Stata. Even though I attended supplementary sessions on how to use Stata, I still have many concerns about using the software effectively and interpreting the data accurately. I would like to continue developing my skills to apply what I have learned in my practicum.

In research, quantitative and qualitative methods are sometimes treated separately, but they can also be integrated effectively. Neither method is superior; rather, they complement each other. During my practicum in the summer of 2025, I plan to participate in research that utilizes either quantitative or qualitative methods. I aim to gain practical knowledge of research methods as a valuable skill through hands-on experience. Together with this plan, I have been selected as one of the visiting researchers starting this April. I will be involved in actual research for about three months within The Global Infrastructure Fund Research Foundation Japan (Japan GIF Research Foundation). It promotes research in the field of infrastructure and offers a "Visiting Researcher" program aimed at graduate students both domestically and internationally. In this program, participants can join Japan GIF's

research projects and contribute as co-authors when research papers are published. Participants will receive academic guidance, learn research methods and skills for writing papers, and may also submit their work to academic journals. As I am interested in interventions for health from the perspective of the built environment, this opportunity will allow me to learn about infrastructure and gain research-related skills, as I have limited experience in research. I am excited to develop these skills through this internship.

D) Gain knowledge on the current U.S. health systems compared with Japanese health systems

What I learned about the US healthcare system is that high healthcare costs are influenced by several factors, including elevated prices for healthcare services, a fragmented system that features numerous insurance companies, the volume of services provided, advanced technology, defensive medicine practices, administrative costs, and insufficient price transparency. These elements contribute to inefficiencies and rising costs. To improve the system, it is essential to adopt a comprehensive approach that emphasizes value-based care, enhances price transparency, expands public health options, and focuses on high-cost and growing populations, such as the elderly. Given the potential resistance from the insurance and healthcare sectors, considering incremental reforms is also wise. I believe that by fostering competition, increasing consumer engagement, and strengthening care delivery, the US can more effectively manage healthcare costs while ensuring quality.

Based on these insights, I believe the Japanese healthcare system provides extensive support and more universal healthcare services. While access to healthcare for residents is significantly guaranteed, the growing demand for healthcare and rising costs—largely due to the declining birthrate and aging population—pose future challenges. In both Japan and the US, the importance of preventive healthcare is increasing to mitigate the social burden created by such demand and costs. Achieving this will require a preventive approach to maintaining healthy residents. However, it can be challenging to encourage individuals to recognize the importance of health and adopt preventive measures while they are still healthy. I aim to gain deeper insight into this issue in further lectures.

E) Narrow down the area of interest for practical training

Originally, I aimed to secure an internship at a research center at Columbia University focused on health promotion both on and off-campus. However, following the inauguration of the Trump administration, many health policy-related organizations such as the CDC and NIH experienced significant disruptions, with activities suspended, funding cut, and valuable research data deleted. Columbia University was also impacted, instituting a hiring freeze that led to the cancellation of its annual internship program. As a result, I began exploring opportunities outside the university. Aligning with my interests in health promotion using behavioral science/nudges and also occupational health, I found an exciting opportunity

at Genentech, a leading biotechnology company offering dynamic internships across various fields, including research, health, safety, environmental initiatives, and business operations. I was hired as an intern in the Safety, Health, and Environment (SHE) field and will be joining the team at Genentech's manufacturing facility in Oceanside, California, from May to August. This internship will allow me to contribute to real-world projects and gain hands-on experience under the mentorship of SHE experts, including team members with nursing backgrounds, which will enrich my learning and practical skills in the field.

#### **4. Living Aspect**

I chose Columbia University not only for its outstanding academic programs but also for the diverse and vibrant environment that embodies Manhattan, New York. This diversity is reflected in my surroundings, where the atmosphere of the city can change dramatically even when I move just one block.

As an international student, I faced challenges related to this diversity. When I first started graduate school, I often asked people where they were from. However, in New York City's diverse environment, individuals are generally not judged by their language or appearance. People interact with the understanding that everyone contributes to the diverse American landscape. Through these experiences, I learned to be more considerate of these differences, both from my own observations and the actions of others.

Manhattan, home to Columbia University, is a cultural hub that offers numerous facilities for students to utilize at no cost. During the semester, I study from morning until night, constantly busy with assignments, often losing track of time in this exciting city. Nevertheless, it is a fantastic place to live, with plenty of opportunities to engage in activities I love after exams and during American holidays and vacations.

While there are certainly challenges, including various incidents and accidents, as a public health student, I recognize that there is much to learn from these experiences, especially concerning health issues in urban settings.

During my time at Columbia University, the International Students and Scholars' Office (ISSO) provides various programs to help international students lead fulfilling lives. For instance, there are many events where I can explore New York alongside other international students. Activities like attending New York Yankees games, watching musicals, and visiting Christmas markets allow me to build new connections and enjoy the city's vibrant atmosphere. Since the medical campus is located separately from the main campus, these opportunities to interact with students from other schools are essential for broadening my knowledge, and I plan to participate actively in them in the rest of my university life.

As for extracurricular activities, I am currently seeking volunteer opportunities. I intend to take on challenges specific to America, such as harm reduction and tribal issues that I have been passionate about for a long time.

## **5. Acknowledgment**

I would like to sincerely thank the staff at the Sasakawa Health Foundation for their tremendous support throughout my journey studying at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. From the very start, they offered me incredible opportunities to enhance my knowledge of healthcare and nursing, particularly regarding Hansen's disease. These experiences have significantly enriched my current studies, and I continue to gain from them. Due to the economic conditions in both Japan and the United States, I have realized that the expenses of studying abroad have surpassed my original expectations. Nevertheless, the financial and living support I have received has allowed me to live comfortably, similar to my life in Japan, and has enabled me to concentrate fully on my academic pursuits. I genuinely appreciate all the assistance I have received and look forward to your ongoing support as I advance in my studies.