

Sasakawa Nursing Fellow 2024 Progress Report

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Introduction

I am currently in the second year of my Master of Public Health program at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and am expected to graduate in May 2025. In this report, I will reflect on my academic journey over the past 18 months and share how I plan to apply the skills and knowledge I have gained to contribute to Japanese society and the global community after graduation.

Key Takeaways from My Studies

During my Master of Public Health program, I have gained valuable insights and experiences in three key areas. First, I developed analytical skills in epidemiological research. Second, I deepened my understanding of workplace mental health through both academic and practical experiences. Finally, I cultivated a mindset geared toward embracing new challenges and strengthening my leadership abilities.

1) Analytical Skills in Epidemiological Research

My primary goal for pursuing an MPH was to build strong analytical skills, especially in quantitative research, through both coursework and my master's thesis. Through my classes, I learned the foundations of epidemiologic study design, methods for minimizing bias, interpreting results, and effectively communicating findings. Each course emphasized real-world applications through coding labs, group projects, and presentations using large datasets.

One course I found especially insightful was *Applied Methods in Health Services and Outcomes Research*. The course emphasized methods to control for bias and confounding in observational study designs, aiming to produce valid evidence on treatment effects in disease outcomes. Assignments and group projects gave me hands-on experience applying methodologies to publicly available datasets, which helped reinforce learning from lectures. Since randomized controlled trials are not always feasible in clinical settings, I found it very valuable to learn how to conduct observational studies while accounting for potential biases.

This foundation directly supported my master's thesis, where I conducted a cross-sectional study using a national sample to examine the relationship between nurse-physician teamwork and nurse burnout. Through this process, I gained practical experience in formulating a hypothesis, conducting a literature review, analyzing data using statistical software, and discussing implications for real-world healthcare systems. I plan to continue working on and finalizing my thesis before I graduate.

2) Knowledge of Workplace Mental Health

Over the past 10 months, I have had the opportunity to intern at One Mind at Work, a non-profit organization focused on promoting mental health in the workplace. This experience allowed me to engage in research projects that explored the root causes of burnout and turnover among various populations, including healthcare professionals, higher education staff, and corporate employees. I conducted interviews, performed literature reviews, presented findings in weekly meetings, and helped develop educational materials. These activities strengthened my understanding of systems-level and organizational strategies to improve mental health outcomes.

In addition, I have worked with Columbia Nursing School on a research project examining how social support within healthcare organizations relates to job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover

intentions among healthcare professionals. As a nurse in Japan, I have already experienced and witnessed how social support from colleagues can help mitigate negative outcomes among nurses and patients. However, while working on the manuscript, I found it interesting to see that this phenomenon is supported by scientific evidence. This process strengthened my motivation to scientifically demonstrate what is commonly believed based on practical experience and to contribute to disseminating that evidence to society.

Through these experiences, I also deepened my understanding of the cultural framework surrounding workplace mental health in the United States. For example, I learned how topics such as intergenerational trauma and the criminal justice system intersect with workplace mental health, perspectives that are not often discussed in Japan. In the United States, there is a growing awareness of how broader social and historical contexts shape mental health outcomes, especially for marginalized populations. This has expanded my perspective on how inclusive, trauma-informed approaches can be integrated into organizational strategies to support employee well-being.

3) Mindset for Embracing Challenges and Leadership

My mindset for tackling new challenges has grown significantly during my time at Columbia. As an undergraduate nursing student in Japan, I did not have the opportunity to learn statistical software or coding. However, recognizing the importance of using data to quantify the impact of healthcare interventions and drive change at the population level, I made it a priority to develop these skills during my MPH program. Although learning new research techniques has been time-consuming and challenging, I have truly enjoyed the process thanks to the support of my professors and friends. This experience has motivated me to cultivate perseverance and maintain a strong passion for achieving long-term goals.

Beyond academics, I actively sought opportunities to contribute to the university community. I served as Vice President of a student club promoting food justice, where I organized monthly events and collaborated with peers and professionals in the food industry. This role helped me grow as a leader and strengthened my confidence in speaking up and engaging with peers who share a similar passion.

How I Would Like to Contribute to Japanese Society and Beyond

I hope to apply the research skills and knowledge I have gained through my master's program to improve mental health and well-being in Japan and beyond. The high suicide rate among working populations remains a serious public health issue in Japan, placing a heavy toll on individuals, families, and society. I would like to engage in research that addresses this challenge. While I recognize that approaches used in the United States may not be directly applicable to Japan due to cultural differences, I believe that research skills are universally powerful. They provide a framework for investigating root causes and developing evidence-based strategies to improve mental health at both the organizational and systems levels. With those skills, I aim to collaborate with institutions globally to gather evidence and share effective practices in the future.

Acknowledgment

I am deeply grateful to the Sasakawa Health Foundation for the generous scholarship that has made this invaluable experience at Columbia University possible. Thanks to their continued support, I have been able to dedicate myself fully to my studies. The Foundation has provided not only financial security but also meaningful opportunities, such as attending special lectures and connecting with fellows who share the common mission. These experiences have been vital to my academic and personal growth. I am committed to working even harder to contribute to Japanese society by applying the knowledge I have gained through my studies after graduation.