

My career

Health educator

Thuy Vu

Research Coordinator at the University of Washington and Project Director at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Seattle, Washington

BLS fast facts: Health educators

- May 2011 wage and salary employment: 56,610
- 2010–20 projection: 37 percent growth (much faster than average)
- May 2011 median annual wage: \$47,940
- Typical education and training: Bachelor's degree. Some positions, such as those in public health, require a master's degree.
- May 2011 top employing industries: Hospitals, local and state governments, individual and family services, and outpatient care centers

A mentor made the difference at the start of Thuy Vu's career. If not for the encouragement of her mentor, Thuy wouldn't have pursued the master's degree that is critical to professional development in her field.

In her jobs at the University of Washington and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Thuy coordinates and directs projects related to cancer research. The jobs overlap, with both focusing on analyzing data and sharing research results for preventing cancer and promoting good health.

Although the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) classifies the type of work Thuy does as that of a health educator, her job tasks differ from most of the health educators she knows. Other health educators with whom Thuy collaborates have more direct interaction with patients than she does in her research-based work.

Job guidance from a mentor can be helpful. But it was especially important to Thuy, whose mentor helped her from the beginning to become involved in research and in

promoting good health. In an occupation like Thuy's, which can vary from one job to another, understanding why her work matters was a key factor in pursuing this career.

What do you do?

I research cancer prevention and promote good health, help communities understand research data and how to use it, and promote best practices (ways of doing the same thing in different situations) that are based on evidence. I work with academic researchers, healthcare professionals, community groups, and state and local health departments.

For example, one of my projects is to evaluate a national colorectal cancer screening program. (A screening is a type of exam to detect disease in people, even when they have no symptoms.) There are guidelines that outline evidence-based strategies for promoting colorectal cancer screening. I'm working with a team to identify which strategies the states are using and to study how states are adapting and using the strategies. We hope this information helps us to understand ways that these strategies can be used with different populations and in different settings to increase colorectal cancer screening rates.

How did you get these jobs?

Through networking and word of mouth. But the work I do now has evolved from what I was originally hired to do. Initially, my experience was in designing educational, intervention, and recruitment materials that would be tested in the field. Now, my focus is more on evaluating and sharing results.

How does your education tie in?

My bachelor's degree is in political science, with a minor in public health and community medicine. The job tasks themselves reflect my minor field of study, but the political science gives me an understanding of the policy behind the work.

I also have an MPH (master of public health) degree with training in the social

and behavioral sciences. During grad school, I held a graduate-student appointment that required a practicum (supervised, hands-on experience) at a cancer research center. I had been exposed to a lot of the MPH curriculum before grad school because of my job, but grad school brought together everything I'd already been doing and gave me the perspective to fully understand it.

The only reason I have my MPH is because of my mentor, Deb, who was the principal investigator of a research group I was part of. Deb made me understand the importance of having a graduate degree in this field. I had no interest in going back to school after college until she encouraged me to get my master's.

What was your first job out of college?

I had a temporary job with a small accounting firm. The head of the firm was very helpful to me when I got an offer elsewhere for a full-time job. He took on a "big brother" role to help me with things like negotiating a salary and benefits.

The job itself didn't necessarily influence my future career plans. But what was meaningful to me was having someone be so supportive even as I was leaving. I got that same kind of support, and more, from Deb later on.

What else led you to your current jobs?

Once, when I was almost finished with my bachelor's, I was home on break and talking about school. Someone asked what I was interested in, and I said, "Psychology." After I got back to school, I wondered why I'd said that—I was a political science major and had taken only one psychology class. But I think I knew even then that I had an interest in understanding behavior.

And in the field, in my job, working in the community, the behavioral science part has been a critical piece. The hard part about

science is that what works in research works in a vacuum. But interacting with other people is what's illuminating and informative. It's the human part that can really throw a wrench in the scientific data.

Any surprises along the way?

The piece that's been most surprising to me is the value placed on mentoring in the academic research community. I'm humbled by the passion and seriousness of mentors, especially the degree of their dedication in helping younger researchers to grow. I'm where I am today because of Deb.

Deb was a phenomenal mentor who took the nurturing of younger staff very seriously. I felt like I was such a priority in her life. Along with helping me develop in my career, she taught me to have confidence in myself, nurtured my interests, and counseled me. Deb really gave me opportunities that made me understand the world of research and working with communities.

What's your best advice?

Actively peruse job postings to strengthen your skill set. If you see a posting for a job that you think looks interesting, dissect it to see what the job really is, what skills are required, and what is required to get those skills. Try to build up your skill set based on those known criteria, or at least study the job posting and know what's involved so you can speak intelligently about it. Beyond that, get hands-on experience through a practicum, internship, or volunteer opportunity.

More broadly, my advice is to find somebody who is willing to take you under his or her wing to teach you and support you. Ideally, a mentor might be able to provide opportunities to grow, but it's important to understand that a mentor's job is not to get you, or give you, a job. A good mentor can be invaluable in jumpstarting a career. 

Thuy Vu was interviewed by Kathleen Green, an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS. Kathleen can be reached at (202) 691-5711 or at green.kathleen@bls.gov.