

Bridging the Gap Between Social Work and Public Health

April 04, 2023 11:11 AM



Kamran Sakhitab

Long before Kamran Sakhitab decided to earn his master's degree, he had what he refers to as a tumultuous undergraduate experience. Prior to making his way to Tulane to earn his undergraduate degree, Sakhitab was in the midst of a six-year dental program, largely at the urging of his parents.

But, after a few months, his parents' mindset began to shift and they encouraged Sakhitab to pursue what makes him happy.

"They told me, 'Hey, we think you're doing this for us and not yourself,'" recalls Sakhitab. "That gave me space to think and analyze what I wanted out of life."

"I wouldn't have been able to access any of this if it wasn't for my parents," he says, noting they lost everything during the Iranian Revolution and were able to start fresh in the US. Growing up hearing stories about and seeing what his family had to do to start over, Sakhitab began thinking about ways to help people who often don't have the ability to start over and who struggle to navigate complex systems.

He made the decision to transfer to Tulane and change his undergraduate major.

Sakhitab is transparent about his mental health during the period of transferring schools. "It was the first time I encountered mental illness, depression, and anxiety," he starts. "I've always been extroverted and I lost my ability to communicate and have conversations."

His training in Jiu Jitsu and martial arts provided him an outlet and he reveals that the increased conversations around mental health, especially among men, during Covid gave him insight into pursuing a degree that would allow him to study trauma and interpersonal behavior.

Sakhitab graduated from Tulane in 2022 as a public health major and social entrepreneurship minor and decided to pursue his master's degree at Tulane, too.

MPH vs. MSW: Which Career is Right For You?

A Master in Social Work degree can prepare you to solve challenges by working directly with individuals, families, and communities, whereas a Master in Public Health degree is focused on systems-level change, community-based programming,

collection and analysis of health-related data, and behavior modification. Both typically require a clinical or practical work experience component, with MSW programs often requiring more hours of practical experience.

What Sakhitab has observed is that many of his friends in the social work program want to go into private practice and earn their LMSW or LCSW, while others want to work in many of the different social work fields. For those in the MPH program, students are looking at a variety of careers from consulting to program design and implementation.

When Sakhitab was weighing the program that was best for his goals, he originally started pursuing a Master in Health Administration degree. Tulane allows undergraduates to take certain graduate courses as part of five-year combined degrees, which Sakhitab says allowed him to get a taste for what it would be like—and that it wasn't the right degree for his goals. "It allowed a time for major introspection for me," he says. "It missed the interpersonal component I longed for, as well as further conversations on how to deal with the inequities present [in the healthcare system]."

He then shifted his program of study to a Master of Public Health (MPH).

In class, he'd learn about the hospital systems, inequities, loopholes, and people falling through the cracks. "I saw that first-hand with my sister who has autism and the barriers we had to go through," shares Sakhitab. "That personal, lived experience and learning in the classroom was all helpful for me to understand the content and, hopefully, apply it one day professionally."

But he still felt like something was missing.

"The times I feel most alive is when I'm engaging with my friends talking about a problem, helping my fellow man," he explains, citing the influence of his Bahá'í Faith and its emphasis on helping your neighbors and equality of all people, among other tenets.

That's where the Master of Social Work (MSW) filled in the gaps. "I realized I really wanted to be a therapist." Sakhitab added the MSW program and officially began the MSW/MPH dual degree program.

What Can You Do with an MSW and MPH Dual Degree?

With an MSW and MPH dual degree, you can pursue careers in either social work or public health fields.

With a Master of Public Health degree, typical careers may include:

- Epidemiologist
- Health services administrator
- Clinical trial manager
- Community health educator
- Environmental health officer
- Social and behavioral health analyst
- Pregnancy care manager
- Policy analyst

With a Master of Social Work degree, graduates go on to work in roles such as:

- Counselor
- Social worker
- Clinician
- Administrator
- Researcher
- Community organizer
- Nonprofit manager
- Educator

With his dual degree, Sakhitab's goal is to open up a clinic that combines mental health care and physical health care to address needs within society. "I've had eczema all my life, but it wasn't until this summer that it improved 80% from addressing the the underlying health issues and constant anxiety in my head," he shares. This first-hand experience made Sakhitab see the importance of doctors sharing information and looking at a patient holistically so that they can address the root causes of issues.

First, though, he's looking to expand his consulting and evaluative skills with a consulting firm, giving him the additional insight and experience needed to one day open his own practice.

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Sakhitab is currently gaining first-hand experience at Tulane Medical Center where he’s doing his field experience in case management. “It’s the perfect position to understand the healthcare system,” he says, revealing at first he had misgivings that he wouldn’t be able to practice actual therapy. After conversations with several of his professors, he started to realize in his role he could see every type of patient and illness, giving him more insight—and more marketable skills.

His supervisor also encouraged him to find moments to practice therapy. “You realize that something may seem ‘trivial,’ but you slow down and look at the patient and see how you can help them,” he says. “It made me realize I’m in the right place doing the right thing.”

What’s the Difference Between MPH and MSW?

While a Master of Public Health typically prepares you to work at a higher level with communities and implement policy changes that can help improve healthcare in populations around the world, a Master of Social Work can prepare you to work directly with individuals, families, and communities to strengthen wellbeing.

But for Sakhitab, the MPH and MSW have more similarities and overlap than differences. “There’s a beautiful interplay,” he begins. “With the MPH I’m learning about different systems, inequities, and theories, and then in the MSW program I’m learning more about micro social work. I’m constantly seeing what’s said in one class in social work apply in public health and vice versa.” Content-wise, Sakhitab finds the biggest difference between the programs is the way the classes are structured. While social work classes are more group discussion based, most of his public health classes are more lecture based.

“With social work, you’re learning about therapy modalities, motivational interviewing, the different levels of the micro, mezzo, and macro exosystem, as well as specifically working with the client,” he shares. “Public health focuses more on health inequities and expands beyond the US to learn about different systems and

the way they function.”

“The two programs really complement each other.”

How New Orleans’ Culture Enhances the Graduate Experience

When asked about what it’s like to live and learn in New Orleans, Sakhitab’s entire demeanor lit up. “I love it here. I’m trying to find the words to encapsulate the experience,” he began.

Sakhitab, who is also earning a certificate in Disaster Resilience Leadership (DRL), tells a story of doing homework for a DRL class while at the Fly, the waterfront portion of the Audubon Riverview Park.

While he was trying to work, a group came beside him with a speaker, grill, refreshments, and more. They offered Sakhitab a drink which turned into a 45-minute conversation. He was worried the music would be distracting from his work. “I can’t work while listening to songs with lyrics,” he says. But the group played jazz and other music without lyrics. “They knew I was writing a paper, so it was that perfect moment where people from different walks of life can come, meet, and enjoy time together.”

Sakhitab also cites the city’s food scene and porch life as a major perk. “My version of self care is to have my textbook read to me using a reading app, such as Speechify or Audible, or play guitar outside.” That’s how lots of connections are made in the city, simply by relaxing in the outside world.

This sense of community is one of the major reasons Sakhitab loves the city. He points out that the resilience of the city runs deep, and it’s the simple things like birds chirping, people walking dogs, and strangers saying, ‘hi’ that contribute to a warm atmosphere. “People finding peace in chaos is beautiful.”

It also makes it an ideal environment to study the intersection of social work, public health, and disaster resilience leadership.

“Natural disasters are only increasing,” he explains. “New Orleans is a case study in resiliency within a community.”

Sakhitab also cites the support he's found at Tulane as being a major benefit, noting at one point he was meeting with the dean of Tulane School of Social Work, as well as several professors. Everyone was in the room to help him talk through research opportunities and map out a good schedule. "Whenever I need something, I can pop into a professor's office," he adds. "Doors are open and everyone is trying to connect people with each other."

"I love Tulane, I love the fraternity and philanthropy around the city. And I love working in a hospital, seeing what I've studied play out in real time."