



PUBLIC HEALTH LABORATORY INTERNSHIP PROGRAM SUCCESS STORY: TENNESSEE STATE PUBLIC HEALTH LABORATORY

The Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL), in collaboration with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), launched the Public Health Laboratory Internship Program: an APHL-CDC Initiative in March 2023. The program offers paid internships that provide an opportunity for current students to gain basic laboratory science skills by working alongside a mentor at a public health laboratory.

Since its inception, The Internship Program focused on recruiting underrepresented students into the public health laboratory career field. To facilitate these efforts, APHL continually cultivates partnerships between minority-serving academic institutions and their local public health laboratories, encouraging students to apply to the Internship Program. Early outcomes are showing that this approach is working.

One of these partnerships is between Tennessee State University (TSU), a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), and the Tennessee Department of Health, Division of Laboratory Services (TDH Laboratory Services). As a direct result of this relationship, TDH Laboratory Services is currently hosting three TSU students as interns. Below we delve into the experiences of two mentors from TDH Laboratory Services and two interns from TSU. These conversations highlight the unique contributions of mentors and interns and the program's effectiveness in nurturing talent.

A TAILORED EXPERIENCE

Mytasia Stone, currently in her second year of TSU's Master of Public Health program after completing her bachelor's degree from the same institution, is interested in pursuing a career in epidemiology. She pursued this internship "to experience the background side of epidemiology." Stone's mentor, Kristin Dunaway, has tailored the experience to her interest in epidemiology by including Stone in various meetings with other epidemiologists and helping Stone network with other laboratory staff, "[my mentor] has introduced me to everyone in the building."



Mytasia Stone

At the forefront of her responsibilities is water testing, a domain she entered without any prior experience. Stone learned every step during the first two months of her internship, and now she is able to run the water tests independently. Stone also specified the internship has helped her improve her technical writing abilities. Stone recently extended her internship and is looking forward to working on COVID-19 wastewater surveillance with her mentor.

Dunaway, who works in the Environmental Microbiology Lab, has been impressed with Mytasia's commitment to learning and underscored how helpful having an intern is to her own workload. She added, "all of her work is done efficiently and has helped quicken processes." Dunaway has most enjoyed witnessing Mytasia getting first-time experience with different laboratory tasks, "she gets a smile on her face, and you can tell she's really having fun."



Kamren Williams

The Internship Program not only provides valuable hands-on experience but also cultivates a tailored and enriching journey for participants like Stone, fostering a passion for their chosen fields within public health laboratories.

UNMASKING A NEW CAREER: A PATH TO PUBLIC HEALTH LABORATORIES

Kamren Williams, a recent bachelor's degree recipient from TSU, vividly recalls his introduction to the world of public health laboratories from an APHL staff member at a career fair at TSU. That encounter led to an internship under the



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guidance of Julie Viruez, the training coordinator in the Operations Department. He appreciated how this program exposed him to a different career path he previously did not know existed.

Julie Viruez, a seasoned professional with over 13 years at TDH Laboratory Services, embraced the role of mentorship for the first time. Although hesitant to become a mentor, she has “thoroughly enjoyed being a mentor to Kamren” and described Kamren as “friendly, motivated, and interested to learn everything about public health.” The opportunity to increase awareness about what public health labs do and to be “a part of [Williams’] career trajectory” were some of the most rewarding aspects for Julie. She hopes to continue serving as a mentor in the program.

PARTNERSHIPS FOSTER DIVERSITY IN PUBLIC HEALTH LABORATORIES

This successful partnership between TSU and TDH Laboratory Services has proven how crucial face-to-face recruitment activities are in exposing more students to careers in public health laboratories. The collaborative efforts of APHL in forming partnerships with minority-serving institutions and public health laboratories stand as a testament to their commitment to inspiring more underrepresented students to pursue the various careers within the realms of public health laboratories.