Alumni Spotlight: Sun Y. Jeon

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What year did you graduate from USU and what was your major/field of interest?

I started by graduate studies at USU in 2010 and graduated in 2017 with three degrees: MS in Sociology, MS in Statistics, and Ph.D. in Sociology. My passion has been in Population & Health, and also quantitative demographic techniques and statistical methods.

I wonder if you could tell me a little about your position at UCSF? How did you end up there, and how do you spend your days?

During my time at USU, it became clear that I wanted to become a quantitative research scientist in the Population & Health field. Upon graduation, I started my career at the UC Davis Center for Healthcare Policy and Research as a statistician. After 1 year, I got an offer from UCSF School of Medicine for a senior statistician position. Research projects at UCSF on mortality prediction, quality of life during the later stages of life, and the relationship between psycho-social factors and prognosis of medical treatment really intrigued me. Researchers at UCSF were also very passionate about learning and applying cutting-edge statistical methods such as machine learning techniques. I thought it was a perfect fit for me.

My job here includes managing and cleaning a variety of data sets, such as longitudinal survey data, Medicare claims data, and Veterans Affair (VA) data, as well as suggesting statistical models to answer research questions, data analysis, and discussing and writing the findings with a team. Multiple research teams consisting of principal investigators, medical doctors and fellows, epidemiologists, and other statisticians work together on various research projects.

How did your time at USU help prepare you for the current work you’re doing? Are there any specific skills that have been useful to you?

Throughout my time at USU, I was able to learn new skills and knowledge through some ‘hands-on’ research experience with great mentors. That training prepared me really well for the job I currently have. While working on the projects, I also learned how to work as a team.

One very special experience I had at USU was teaching. As a graduate instructor I taught social statistics for two semesters. While teaching, I spent a lot of time thinking about how to explain the statistical concepts in a logical but easy way. Now, whenever I communicate with anyone who is not familiar with statistical concepts, I go back to the moments when I was preparing for my classes. I really believe that teaching is the best way to learn.

Was there a particular mentor or professor who inspired you when you were a student here? Can you talk a little about that?

I was very lucky to work with my mentor, Dr. Eric Reither, during my 7 years at USU. He was the person who showed me how to conceive a research question, explore methodological approaches to test it, and communicate with the world about my findings. His support and caring made huge differences, and I cannot thank him enough.

Drs. Mike Toney and So-jung Lim were also great mentors. They were amazing teachers in the classroom, great researchers outside of the classroom, and hilarious human-beings off-campus.

As you may know, we just celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Yun Kim Population Lab last year, and we’re gathering personal stories about the Lab. In what way(s) were you involved with the population lab, and how did it impact your work, research, or career?

The story goes back to 30+ years ago. I bet Dr. Kim was a mentor of so many great students, and one of those
students was Dr. Syng-il Hyun, who graduated from USU with a PhD in sociology in 1983. Dr. Hyun was one of my mentors back in Korea.

One night in 2009 when I was working at a restaurant in Seoul, Korea and looking for a job after graduating from college, I got a call from Dr. Hyun. He introduced this wonderful opportunity at the USU Pop lab to me. From there, it did not take long to meet Dr. Yun Kim, Dr. Mike Toney, and Dr. Rick Krannick while they were visiting Korea. After talking to them, I knew coming to USU would be my next step. I still remember the day I was assigned to a desk in the Pop lab. At that time, of course, I didn't know I would spend 7 years there.

After that, I had a number of memorable learning and academic adventures because research projects, classes, seminars, and discussions were always happening. The Pop Lab is where I started dreaming of becoming a good research scientist and was able to get the training I needed to achieve the dream. It is my academic home; I always miss it and would love to return.

Anything else you’d like to share with students considering a career in sociology, or more specifically students interested in the graduate program in sociology at USU?

Knowledge I learned, experiences I had, and the people I met at USU are priceless. The department can provide a great environment to students who want to study sociology deeper and learn more about research and teaching, with wonderful mentors and fellow students. So, if you're interested, don’t hesitate to knock on the door.