

Megan Price: Life-Long ‘Math Nerd’ Finds Career in Social Justice

An interview with the executive director of the Human Rights Data Analysis Group

David Corliss, Peace-Work



Megan Price

Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG, www.hrdag.org) is engaged in the analysis of human rights violations around the world. As the executive director of HRDAG, Megan Price designs and manages statistical projects in many locations. She is a lead investigator for a number of HRDAG projects in addition to her roles in strategic direction, management, and study design.

Tell me about your early background. Were you always interested in statistics?

I was always a math nerd. My mother has a polaroid of me in the fourth grade with my science fair project ... It was the history of mathematics. In college, I was a math major for a year and then switched to statistics.

I always wanted to work in social justice. I was raised by hippies, went to protests when I was young. I always felt I had an obligation to make the world a little bit better. One event I remember is when I was in the fourth grade and there was a teacher strike where I lived in West Virginia. My parents talked about it and the issues with me at home. It was first time I remember being part of it, being taught about the grey areas, looking at the hard questions and trying to find answers.

What did you study in college? Did it do a good job of preparing you for this work?

My bachelor's and master's in statistics are from Case. While there, I became involved with the department's statistical consulting program, working at the Cleveland Clinic there in public health. I was always careful to choose elective courses in public health and social justice while studying statistics.

At Emory, where I earned my PhD in biostatistics, there is a certificate program in human rights. I took elective courses in health and human rights and an introduction to public health law class.

You once said you were “lucky to get your dream job right out of grad school.” What were the important turning points you remember that had the biggest impact on your career?

There were three. I first heard about HRDAG while working on my PhD at Emory. When I was just starting to think about where to go after my doctorate, HRDAG received a grant and posted a position for a statistician who would be working on a complex sampling problem and studying the historic archive of the National Police in Guatemala. I felt like I wasn't ready yet because I wasn't certain when I would finish my dissertation, successfully defend it, etc. I had a general feeling of unreadiness for a full-time job. David Banks, who was a mentor for me, really encouraged me to apply. That was the first big turning point, when I started working for HRDAG.

The second was when HRDAG went independent. Patrick Ball started HRDAG as a AAAS project. Later, we were part of Benetech for nine years. In 2013, HRDAG spun off to become more of an independent organization and I became director of research. It was a time of change in the organization, and I took on a leadership role. Patrick was an important mentor for me at this time, helping me develop leadership and organizational skills.

The third big turning point was in 2015. Patrick and I took a look at the projects and tasks to be done, the roles to be filled, our skill sets, and where we saw HRDAG going as we moved forward. We decided to basically switch jobs: I became executive director and he became director of research.

Looking back on your career, what advice do you have for someone in school or just starting out?

When in school, be sure to take electives that are interesting. Try different things and take advantage of different options and opportunities to see what is best for you.

Go to as many conferences and workshops as possible. I know resources can be limited, so get support from wherever you can. Talk to your department at school. Many conferences offer scholarships, so apply for them. Also, your local ASA chapter can be an important source of support. Develop a strong connection with your local chapter. They can help with mentoring, resources,

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- HRDAG Director of Research, 2013–2015; Statistician, 2009–2013
- PhD, Biostatistics, and certificate in Human Rights, Emory University
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networking, and support for attending conferences and seminars. Be active in the ASA. That's how I made connections with many people who have helped and encouraged me.

It isn't something I'm naturally good at, but it is something important I have learned: Use Twitter and hashtags. Now I use hashtags all the time—#Data4Good, #AI, #AIRoleModels ... Twitter generally and specific hashtags can be a way to learn about new things.

For people early in their career, be sure to try different things. Make sure you keep your net really, really wide open and just see what pops up. ■



You can follow Megan on Twitter @StatMegan

BASS XXV Scheduled for Fall

The 25th Biopharmaceutical Applied Statistics Symposium (BASS XXV) will be held October 15–19 at the Hotel Indigo Savannah Historic District in Savannah, Georgia. One-hour tutorials on diverse topics pertinent to the research, clinical development, and regulation of pharmaceuticals will be presented by speakers from academia, the pharmaceutical industry, and the US Food and Drug Administration. Two parallel, two-day short courses will be presented October 17–19. BASS will also offer a poster session.

BASS is a nonprofit entity established to support graduate studies in biostatistics. For further information, contact the BASS registrar at rewhitworth@gmail.com or BASS chair, Tony Segreti, at segretia@bellsouth.net. Visit the BASS website at www.bassconference.org.