Savannah **Hammerton**

GRADUATE STUDENT, EPIDEMIOLOGY & BIOSTATISTICS

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Personal Statement

When I first applied to the MPH program at UGA, I reflected on my path to finding a career that I could be passionate about and excel in. This path took me in a number of different directions, but when I began my course of study at UGA in Fall 2020, I quickly became certain that I had found the career I had been searching for. I became increasingly interested in learning about epidemiological and biostatistical methods; so much so that I applied for and transferred to the MS program in Epidemiology and Biostatistics. As I have worked in my classes for this degree, I have found that the more I learn, the more I realize I don't know. I have also found that I have a strong desire to build expertise in this field. To that end, I am applying to the PhD program in Epidemiology and Biostatistics, with a concentration in Epidemiology.

I have particular interest in the epidemiology of infectious diseases, and I have worked to develop expertise in this area during my master's program. I hope to continue this development throughout my doctoral program. I am completing the requirements for the Graduate Certificate in Infectious Disease Epidemiology this semester, and am using my master's thesis to focus on infectious disease as well. My thesis is focused on assessing what antibody levels confer protection against norovirus infection, using logistic regression and regularization methods such as LASSO. I am a member of the Center for the Ecology of Infectious Diseases (CEID) at UGA, and joined with the hope of gaining more experience through my work there. My membership will also allow me to utilize my existing knowledge to advance infectious disease research. I plan to continue this focus in my PhD program. My research interests include all infectious disease epidemiology, infectious disease dynamics, and the One Health approach, in particular zoonotic diseases and spillover events. I aim to study these topics by developing conceptual understanding of the various factors contributing to disease spread, and applying that knowledge to strong epidemiological, biostatistical, and modeling methods.

One of the factors that encouraged me to apply to this program is the crossover of required coursework between the MS and PhD programs. I have been very successful in my courses this Fall, taking many classes that are required for the PhD, including EPID 8010, BIOS 8010, and EPID 8500. My ability to still perform in the upper portion of my classes, even when I am one of only a few master's level students, gives me confidence that I could be successful in the PhD. My interest and enjoyment of these classes and what they teach give me confidence that I will continue to enjoy the coursework in the PhD, which will give me additional motivation to work to perform better than requirements and expectations. I have enjoyed the biostatistics and data analysis/modeling coursework a great deal, but have always felt particularly drawn to epidemiology. This is my reason for choosing epidemiology as my intended concentration. I enjoy approaching new and complex problems within an epidemiological framework, and using that framework to investigate potential causes of and solutions to these problems.

I have felt very fortunate during my time so far in this department to work with such wonderful faculty members. My work with Dr. Handel on my thesis, as well as his classes I have taken, has helped me progress in my skills in data analysis and modeling beyond what I ever hoped for, while also raising my hopes and expectations to continue to progress beyond where I am now. I believe I could meet this goal by continuing to work with and learn from him in any capacity. Working with Dr. Cordero on his environmental exposures and preterm birth review has allowed me the opportunity to gain additional experience in planning a paper from start to finish and assessing current knowledge on a topic as well as the associated gaps in the literature. I have also enjoyed studying the impact of environmental exposures on human health, and would love to continue working with him this.