

Jane Menken
Distinguished Professor of Sociology
Research Professor, Institute of Behavioral Science
483 UCB
Boulder, Colorado 80309-0483

t 303 492 2326
f 303 492 2151
e menken@colorado.edu

January 3, 2018

TO: Whom it may concern
FROM: Jane Menken



RE: Phi Trang
Computer Software Internship

I am writing to recommend Phi Trang for internships in his field of computer software.

Phi has been a student assistant in the Institute of Behavioral Science, originally as a member of the support staff. It soon became clear that he was both interested and well-qualified to working on research projects. He became a member of a student team on a project funded by the US National Science Foundation. His performance is outstanding.

He will bring to an internship the same outstanding combination of willingness and ability to acquire new skills, interest in substance as well as technical detail, and ability to work well within a team that characterized his work on this project.

Background of the assignment: Nearly all countries in Latin America have decentralized their national health services nationwide under the premise that services better meet the needs of their communities if they are administered closer to those communities. Yet there are few if any scientific evaluations of this premise. Honduras offers a unique “natural experiment,” in that decentralization began about 10 years ago in some municipios (smaller administrative units similar to counties within US states) but the process was stopped by a change in the government. There are, therefore, centralized municipios whose health services are run by the Ministry of Health and decentralized municipios.

Our evaluation project includes a household survey designed to collect information on service utilization and health directly from community members in a matched sample of centralized and decentralized municipios. There were three sub-surveys. Crucial to the evaluation is ensuring that the sub-surveys of a given household can be linked properly.

The task for the team members had two parts.

- They were asked to create and program a strategy for comparing household rosters across surveys to determine whether there was a perfect match or lists of household members did not match across the sub-surveys or sub-surveys were missing.
- They were asked to develop and implement a strategy for reconciling the errors they detected.

They performed both tasks extremely well. For the first, they pooled their knowledge of programming languages to write the needed programs. And when they realized they lacked appropriate tools, they learned the syntax of a (to them) new programming language (Visual Basic) in a matter of minutes to write working scripts.

Of the over 9000 households, about 10% had errors that could not immediately be corrected. They then split the approximately 900 households with errors among themselves and hand-checked and corrected obvious errors (e.g. household members reported in a different order across sub-surveys).

The project thus included both technical and creative aspects of programming and the often-tedious detail work of hand-checking data. The team members had to figure out how to collaborate and how to share their work with the others.

In all aspects, this team performed independently, extremely well, and at high professional standards. In fact, they voluntarily worked evenings and weekends to complete the work in the available timeframe. Phi performed at the same high level we expect of graduate research assistants. He is clearly a mature, self-starting person.

IBS is developing plans for offering research opportunities to undergraduate students. This project is now viewed as the very successful pilot program that will inform future plans.

My comparison group for Phi is the many undergraduate and graduate students I have worked with in the over 40 years I have been a professor at Princeton University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Colorado Boulder.

I expect him to be fully successful in his future academic and work endeavors.

I am pleased to offer my highest recommendation for him for internships in his areas of interest.