

Mary Odle

Associate Director of Finance and Operations
Health Policy and Management

Background

Meet Mary - a compelling and dedicated, long-term member of the Harvard Community. She highly values learning, receiving an Associate's Degree in Fashion, an Associate's Degree and a Bachelor's Degree at the Harvard Extension School, and then a Master's Degree from Emmanuel College. Mary's radiant personality and strong work ethic are only a few of the reasons why she has made a lasting impact with her work, and why she continues to grow her 34-year career here at Harvard.



Her story starts in 1979, when Mary moved to Massachusetts from Barbados with her husband and 2 ½ year old daughter. Getting acclimated to the United States was challenging, as expected, but Mary and her family made Massachusetts their home. Her first job, upon settling into Massachusetts, was at Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) – in accounting. She was an Accounting Supervisor back in Barbados and even though she was accepting a job at BCBS that she was overqualified for, she thought it was a great first step in becoming grounded and accustomed to the United States. In just a short amount of time, her path at Blue Cross Blue Shield moved from accounting to corporate budgeting. After establishing a promising career path at BCBS, Mary became pregnant with her second child and took 2 years off from work to be with her young son and family.

After those 2 years, Mary decided that she was ready to go back to work. An advertisement in the newspaper caught her attention – an open position as an Accounts Receivable Associate at Harvard University. It didn't matter to her that this position was more entry-level than her previous work experience; she jumped at the opportunity because it was a great first step in getting her foot in the door at the prestigious Harvard University. She interviewed for the role and was offered the position within a week – and from there, her career took off. Mary quickly made great connections with her colleagues and got along particularly well with her manager, which she says made the difference in her becoming excited to come to work every day. She also enjoyed that she could continue working in accounting and finance, which she loves because it allows you to be creative in problem-solving. After a short while, she became intrigued by sponsored research and attended a related seminar – which confirmed her interest in that area. When a position opened in this field, Mary jumped at the opportunity and once she was in the position, realized that this was the direction she wanted to move her career into. She says it's because this kind of work, "keeps you thinking." About 2 years later, Mary then moved up into a Non-Federal Grants Supervisor role, allowing her to work with all Departments and giving her many chances to network and make connections across the University. She worked particularly closely with the Department of Health Policy and Management at SPH, finding that she wanted to explore opportunities within that group.

Mary's first office was in a closet-sized room due to a reorganization, which proves how strong and passionate her work ethic is. She worked hard to accept opportunities that came her way, to develop in her career, and to build strong rapport with her colleagues. After another Departmental reorganization and through maintaining her connections with SPH colleagues, Mary was offered the position of Associate Director of Finance and Operations within SPH's Department of Health Policy and Management in 2001 – and has been in that role since.

Mary says that networking is so very important, because that's what makes people feel comfortable when deciding to hire you. Networking can be accomplished by putting yourself out there, helping others, and taking advantage of every opportunity no matter how small. It's important to have the mindset that other people are part of your team as well, even when they don't sit in your office. We are all working together to support the amazing things that the Harvard community accomplishes, and then shares with the rest of the world.

Recommendations for Staff

Mary advises that the best thing you can do is take responsibility of the job that you have right now, and to do it to the best of your ability. It's important to create a reputation of being helpful, resourceful, and selfless. When you do that, it shows – people gravitate to you and opportunities will present themselves. Look for ways to enrich your career as well – get more engaged and involved, ask questions, expose yourself to new things, and don't be afraid to say, "I don't know this, I would love to learn more about it." She also advises for you to look around – as there is so much knowledge around you. Everyone around you knows something that you don't. They have different viewpoints and different perspectives that you may not be aware of. No person knows everything, so have that outlook and feel confident about asking anyone, at any level in an organization, questions. Doing so will open a window into discovering new things, and having opportunities to share knowledge and experiences. As Mary puts it, "always show interest in something – be curious, take courses, attend seminars, and put yourself in the driver's seat of your career. Be in charge of your future."

What do you like most about working at SPH?

The people. Because the work itself can be repetitive and not very challenging at times, people are what makes the difference. She appreciates the little things that keep her busy and interested in her job, and values the feeling of being of service to the Department and supporting the overall mission of the School. Solving a problem is a great and admirable part of her job as well, and being able to do research to keep the Department, faculty members, and School in compliance.

Resource to You

Interested in learning more about Mary and her work, or getting one-on-one advice from Mary herself? Contact her directly via email!

How about You?

Interested in telling us your success story? Let us know by sending an email to slongo@hsph.harvard.edu.