

Public Health 101: Coming to a Campus Near You?

Jocelyn Winter, a senior public health major at George Washington University, distinctly remembers the day she decided that the U.S. health care system lacked sufficient coordination. She was seated in her Public Health 101 class—a course designed to give every undergraduate college student a knowledge base in health issues.

"We had a discussion comparing health care in the United States to the U.K. and Canada, and it opened my eyes to how our health care lines up with other countries," she said. "These public health basics are important because they affect a large portion of our society and touch quality of life."

Winter's public health class is helping to pioneer an educational movement sweeping the nation's colleges and universities. Generally speaking, many academic leaders are designing new curricula that will transform student bodies into an "educated citizenry." As part of this effort, they want students to have a solid understanding of public health and health issues, regardless of what career they choose. In addition to Public Health 101, school leaders are crafting introductory epidemiology and global health courses.

Students taking one of these courses can expect to learn about environmental health, the U.S. health care system, disaster preparedness, and health behavior changes, among other topics. Instructors also provide guidance on how to apply this knowledge to everyday life.

Richard Riegelman, M.D., Ph.D., founding dean of George Washington's school of public health, said this academic movement is partially a response to a 2003 Institute of Medicine recommendation that all undergraduates have access to public health education. Students can choose to take these courses to fulfill one of their general education requirements. Riegelman, a professor of epidemiology, biostatistics, medicine, and health policy, has been a primary leader of this initiative.

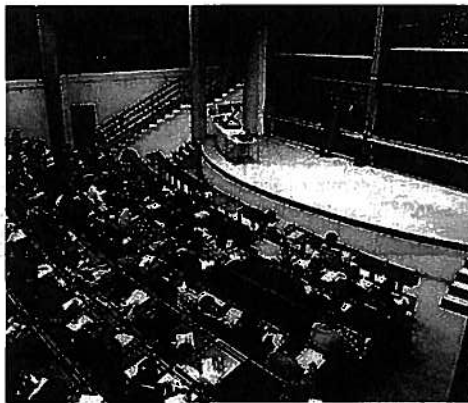
"Our goal is to have students who can read and comprehend basic and clinical research," he said. "We want them to intelligently read the newspaper and understand the onslaught of health news that reaches them daily. We want them to accurately assess health risks, benefits, and treatments."

Currently, he said, approximately 100 academic institutions have some type of general public health education, and roughly 1,900 could choose to incorporate it. To help schools that do not have these courses, the Association for Prevention Teaching and Research (APTR) is developing a curriculum guide for all colleges and universities that will include recommended topics and teaching methods for public health education.

In addition to the APTR, the Association of Schools of Public Health and the Council of Colleges of Arts and Sciences support implementing widespread public health education.

The College of New Jersey has already made headway, bringing together 17 faculty members and four deans to design the school's first integrated public health program, said Susan Albertine, Ph.D., an English professor and dean of the college's school of culture and society. She has worked closely with Riegelman and is actively involved in efforts to educate students in integrative, social ways.

According to Elahe Nezami, Ph.D., director for undergraduate studies at the Institute for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Research at the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine, 78 percent of students taking the university's undergraduate public health class are majoring in public health, pre-medicine, or a similar field. However, students interested in careers outside of clinical health care are signing up as well.



Some professors say that an undergraduate-level public health course could stimulate interest in health careers.

"The second largest group [of students in the public health course] go to law school," Nezami said. "They choose health care law and report they are extremely satisfied with how their public health background has helped them."

Aspiring medical students also benefit from the course as they look toward medical school. Those who take these classes bring valuable information to their medical training, said Paul Marantz, M.D., head of the division of education in the department of epidemiology and population health at Albert Einstein College of Medicine (AECOM).

"As someone who teaches medicine, I love to teach students who come from different educational backgrounds," Marantz said. "Students who have had public health courses have a broader and deeper understanding of scientific research and methodology."

These students will be prepared to understand reasons behind public health problems rather than only concentrate on healing an immediate sickness, he said.

Not only will public health classes prepare students to be well-rounded doctors, but they will also help many decide whether medicine is their true calling, Riegelman said. Among undergraduates, 30 percent to 40 percent consider medical school each year, and public health courses can help them understand what being a physician entails, he said. Medical schools would benefit because new cadres of students would know, in greater detail, what lies ahead. It is still unclear whether applicant numbers will rise due to these new public health curricula.

But not all schools can easily make public health courses part of their academic offerings. Liberal arts colleges currently do not have qualified faculty to teach the classes even though student demand is high, said Devavani Chatterjea, Ph.D., an assistant professor of biology at Macalester College in Minnesota. Chatterjea is helping to bring undergraduate public health education to liberal arts schools.

According to Chatterjea, Macalester is developing a community and global health interdisciplinary concentration that will serve as an academic minor. This plan is an adaptation of how universities with health care faculty will fashion the public health/epidemiology/global health courses, giving much attention to public health methodologies. Macalester will begin offering its version of these classes during the 2008-2009 academic year. Classes will combine various aspects of math, computer science, biology, psychology, anthropology, and political science.

"Our professors are excited to be part of this movement and to retool their classes to include relevant information," Chatterjea said. "We already have a group of students who have been interested in this idea for a long time. Having these classes, especially in a liberal arts setting, will help us bring all disciplines into the same room to have a conversation."

—By Madeleine Evans, special to *the Reporter*

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