

News

For Undergrads, a Shot of Public Health

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Ask 10 people what an educated citizen should study and you're bound to get 10 different answers (albeit with some overlap). The **Educated Citizen and Public Health Initiative continues to make its case** that public health should make any such list, and recently released a set of recommendations for integrating public health into general and liberal education.

"This is not about professional education. This is about citizenship," said Susan Albertine, co-author of "**Recommendations for Undergraduate Public Health Education.**"

"One of the great benefits will be that more people will choose health professions when we desperately need them. But a lot of it is about the fundamental concept that educated citizens make better choices," said Albertine, a former English professor and dean, and now a senior director at the Association of American Colleges and Universities, one of several associations that has been involved in the public health initiative.

"We really thought that we should advocate for general education as a way to introduce the largest number of undergraduates to the concepts of public health."

The recommendations, which come at a time of burgeoning interest in public health as a field of study, feature course development materials, including learning outcomes and curriculum frameworks, for Public Health 101, Epidemiology 101 and Global Health 101. The three courses could form the core for minors in public health, but also could be used to fulfill general education requirements.

"The interest among the students is enormous. The interest among the faculty is growing rapidly, but I think everybody appreciates that if you don't have a health sciences component at your institution and you don't have a school of public health or a program in public health, then you do need some help getting things going," said Richard K. Riegelman, the report's other co-author and a professor and founding dean of the School of Public Health and Health Services at George Washington University.

"One of the attractions of public health to the liberal arts is it is interdisciplinary, inherently so. We are trying to utilize people's existing expertise, existing interest, and give them the tools to make the job easier," said Riegelman. He said that the initiative's emphasis has been on general education and minors, and that those involved have been neutral on the question of creating new public health majors outside of institutions with existing programs or schools. "Which gets into accreditation, it gets into questions of articulation to graduate education, it gets complicated," he said. "Our position has been, rather than to comment on that, to focus on the minors where everybody agrees" on the need.

A 2008 AAC&U **survey** of 837 institutions found that 137, or 16 percent, offered a major, minor or concentration in public health. Their prevalence varied greatly by institution type. Only 5 percent of baccalaureate institutions surveyed had undergraduate public health programs, and about half (49 percent) of institutions offering master of public health degrees offered undergraduate programs.

Many expect those figures to grow. "Undergraduate public health education is burgeoning," said Harrison C. Spencer, president and CEO of the Association of Schools of Public Health, which represents the 40 Council on Education for Public Health-accredited schools. The association has collaborated on the Educated Citizen and Public Health Initiative (including by funding the survey above). "The collaboration is really based on an explosion of interest in undergraduate public health. So many of their [AAC&U] members are looking to do courses or minors, and many places where there are existing accredited schools are also looking to do majors," Spencer said.

The College of Saint Rose, in Albany, is launching a **new 22-credit interdisciplinary minor** in public health this fall. "To create a minor, we basically just needed some basic background classes and for a culmination of other classes that were already on the books

or were being created just to be in one place," said Stephanie A. Bennett, an assistant professor of sociology who's coordinating the program. She'll be teaching the minor's three core courses, Introduction to Public Health (which includes a service learning component), Social Statistics and Epidemiology. Students can choose from a range of electives, including Environmental Ethics or Post 9/11: Ethical Issues in Disaster Planning and Response, both offered by philosophy; Pathogenic Microbiology or Biology of AIDS; and Substance Abuse or Family Violence, both offered by social work.

"If nothing else, it gives them a skill set," Bennett said of the planned minor. "It may also open their eyes to [the fact] that some things they're interested in may be public health." Perhaps they would choose to pursue that interest in graduate school, she said.

Whetting students' appetite for graduate study, so to speak, is a shared goal. The Association of Schools of Public Health in 2008 estimated that 250,000 new public health workers would be needed by 2020 – a need that ultimately must be answered at the graduate level. (And indeed, there's been growth there in recent years.)

"I want people to go into public health. That's my big push right there in a nutshell," said Jeanette Jeffrey, an associate professor of public health and nutrition at Howard Community College, in Maryland, which is starting a new A.A. degree program in public health this fall. It's designed as a transfer degree, to articulate with a four-year public health program at University of Maryland Baltimore County. "It's truly a transfer degree, and not a stand-alone degree in public health," said Jeffrey. "You can't go out and get a job just after getting an A.A. degree in public health. In fact, if you're looking at a bachelor's degree, the advisement says you go on for a master's."

— Elizabeth Redden

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