Healthy People 2020 and Education For Health
Successful Practices in Undergraduate Public Health Programs

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Charlotte, North Carolina

Bachelor of Science in Public Health (BSPH)
Minor in Public Health (Minor)
Master of Science in Public Health (MSPH)
Graduate Certificate in Community Health (Certificate)
http://publichealth.uncc.edu/

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INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

UNC Charlotte is North Carolina’s urban research university. It leverages its location in the state’s largest city to offer internationally competitive programs of research and creative activity, exemplary undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs, and a focused set of community engagement initiatives. UNC Charlotte maintains a particular commitment to addressing the cultural, economic, educational, environmental, health, and social needs of the greater Charlotte region. The university values accessible and affordable quality education; a strong foundation in liberal arts; a robust intellectual environment that values social and cultural diversity, free expression, collegiality, integrity, and mutual respect; and a safe, diverse, team-oriented, ethically responsible, and respectful workplace environment (http://administration.uncc.edu/university-mission-statement).

UNC Charlotte is one of a generation of universities founded in metropolitan areas of the United States immediately after World War II in response to rising education demands generated by the war and its technology. The Charlotte Center opened in 1946 and Charlotte College moved in 1961 into two new buildings on what was to become a 1,000-acre campus 10 miles from downtown Charlotte. In 1965, the legislature approved bills creating the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the fourth campus of the statewide university system. In 1969, the university began offering programs leading to master’s degrees and in 1992 it was authorized to offer programs leading to doctoral degrees. UNC Charlotte is the fourth largest campus among the 17 institutions of The University of North Carolina system and the largest institution of higher education in the Charlotte region offering 19 doctoral programs, 63 master’s degree programs and 91 bachelor’s degrees. Fall 2011 enrollment exceeds 25,400 students, including more than 5,200 graduate students (http://publicrelations.uncc.edu/information-media-kit/university-history).
PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The Bachelor of Science in Public Health (BSPH) program at UNC Charlotte - a new degree program approved by the UNC Board of Governors in spring 2007 - was launched in fall 2007. The likely success of the proposed BSPH degree was based, in part, on an existing, popular minor (Interdisciplinary Health Studies) offered by the Department of Public Health Sciences: enrollment in the minor rocketed from 4 students, in 2002, to over 200 students, in 2009. Based on extensive stakeholder assessment, the BSPH program was designed to fully complement existing Master of Health Administration (MHA) and Master of Science in Public Health (MSPH) degree programs. The Department received initial three-year accreditation of the MHA degree program by the Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education (CAHME) in 2007 and six-year reaccreditation in 2010; and subsequently received initial five-year accreditation of the unit’s public health programs by the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) in 2009.

The BSPH program is designed to prepare scholar-practitioners with knowledge and skills in the core concepts of public health including: health behavior, research and statistics in health, environmental health, epidemiology, and health administration, as well as in the planning, evaluation, organization, and conduct of community and public health services. The course of study adopts an interdisciplinary focus and includes the development of tailored skills through the successful completion of a minor, electives, and experiential learning. The degree prepares students who are interested in pursuing careers in health promotion, program delivery, health communication, community organization, and behavior change for entry level to mid-level positions in service and research in health departments, public health agencies, community-based organizations, outreach education programs, hospitals, private health organizations, and corporate wellness settings. The BSPH is strategically aligned with the mission, plans, and goals of the Department, the College of Health and Human Services, and The University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

The Department of Public Health Sciences was originally founded as the Department of Health Behavior and Administration in 2002, as part of the transformed College of Health and Human Services. The new Department was conceived in response to recommendations derived from UNC Charlotte’s Health Commission report (2000) as well as a variety of initiatives emphasizing population health and health behavior research. In May 2007, the Department was renamed “Public Health Sciences” to better reflect the unit’s larger-scale set of current and planned research programs, degree offerings, and service activities that are relevant to contemporary public health. The BSPH program is housed within the Department of Public Health Sciences. The public health degree programs are overseen by the Public Health Programs Governance Committee (PHPGC), which reports to the Department Chair. Each program has a designated faculty coordinator supported by an advisory committee of 3-4 faculty members. The coordinators of the public health degree programs serve on the PHPGC, which has oversight of academic and curricular matters.

The faculty in the Department of Public Health Sciences and the faculty from other units that contribute to the success of the Department’s programs reflect the commitment and involvement of our public health programs to interdisciplinarity. Many courses offered by the department are cross-
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listed to reach a broad mix of students and/or serve students from related graduate programs (e.g., MHA, PhD in Health Services Research, PhD in Health Psychology) and undergraduate programs (e.g., health communication, exercise science, gerontology, women’s studies, and nursing). In turn, students frequently enroll in courses offered by other departments to fulfill elective requirements (e.g., courses in anthropology, sociology, public administration, and statistics). The Dean’s Office arranges affiliation agreements with health care institutions in the region that facilitate participation in internships and practicum projects. The College of Health and Human Services maintains about 400 agreements with health service organizations and agencies in Charlotte and surrounding areas.

The Department coordinates the activities of multiple advisory boards comprised of on-campus and off-campus practitioners, researchers, health care administrators and providers, and community and state leaders. The Department’s Public Health Advisory Board provides strategic guidance to meet the region’s public health workforce development and training needs through an evolving portfolio of courses and programs in public health. The Board is comprised of a range of community development, health care, health promotion, and public health partners from the greater Charlotte metropolitan region, and has been meeting regularly since before 2005. The Department has also hosted several community-wide roundtables since 2003 in response to national priorities and institutional opportunities to examine the region’s future public health workforce development and training needs, and to plan an accredited School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, North Carolina’s urban research university. (http://www.human-resources-health.com/content/7/1/71)

CURRICULUM

The Department of Public Health Sciences was organized as an interdisciplinary unit, and was uniquely positioned to examine a wide range of possible goals, initiatives, and programs in light of its new environment. The process started by simultaneously examining faculty strengths and priorities and explicit University and College goals to frame discussions that began at the unit’s first retreat in spring 2002. The newly conceived College of Health and Human Services, for example, was perceived as a potential leader in establishing a thriving research base that emphasized population health and health behavior research; and generating responsive and progressive health and human service training programs. The development of the unit’s mission was synchronized with the formation of the new College, the institution’s rapid growth, the rich resources of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg region, and national trends evident in recent reports from the Institute of Medicine. The competency-based BSPH program includes instructional goals (to develop student competency in the core areas of public health; and to develop student competency to inform, assist, and promote public health through critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis of health information), research goals (to engage students in public health-related activities and programs in the community; and to develop oral and written communication skills to disseminate public health scholarship) and service goals (to encourage student involvement in public health-related local, regional, and national professional organizations; and to provide opportunities for student development as a practice professional).

The BSPH major includes 50 hours of courses. Core courses are designed to provide students with a solid foundation in the core disciplines (i.e., health behavior, epidemiology, administration, environmental health, and biostatistics) and core functions (i.e., assessment, program and policy development, assurance, and/or communication) of public health. Students complete courses in
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Public Health Education and Promotion, Behavior Change Theories and Practice, Comparative Healthcare Systems, Research and Statistics in Health, Healthcare Administration, Environmental Health, Epidemiology, and Program Planning and Evaluation. Students enroll in a capstone course during their final semester in the program as a culminating project or experience; capstone projects focus on student opportunities to synthesize and integrate student knowledge and understanding of community health issues acquired throughout the program. Students also complete any approved university minor, 6 hours of Culture & Health Electives, and 12 hours of Health Related Electives.

A distinctive feature of the BSPH program involves an internship experience that provides opportunities to gain basic knowledge and skills related to working in community health settings. Students complete a minimum of 160 hours of actual work experience and maintain a daily log with journal entries; attend a weekly 3-hour seminar course to discuss predetermined topics related to working in community health settings; and prepare and present a final report on the internship experience. The BSPH student internships develop direct understanding and experience in public health and expose students to organizational cultures, management systems, operations and resources, programs and services, and target populations. The practice experience occurs in a carefully-selected health services organization. An internship site must be able to provide practical experience in one or more of the five core disciplines of public health; coordinate entry-level activities that are comparable to undergraduate students’ knowledge and skills; offer opportunities for undergraduate students to interact with staff members and agency clients, if applicable; and organize time and space for student education. BSPH student internships must include learning objectives and must have a qualified, program approved preceptor at the internship site. The Agency Preceptor serves as a professional mentor for the student in the internship placement. Recent BSPH internship sites include: American Cancer Society; Charlotte Community Health Clinic; Clean Air Coalition; Fit City Worksite Health Program; LiveWell Carolinas; Mecklenburg County Health Department; Metrolina AIDS Project; and Planned Parenthood (http://health.uncc.edu/bachelor-science-public-health).

The Department also offers a Minor in Public Health, consisting of 22 semester hours including the following required courses: Foundations of Public Health, Epidemiology, and Global Health Issues. The minor supports students interested in health-related careers or those seeking a health dimension within other career choices. Students in the minor come from biological, social, and behavioral sciences, as well as from health-related academic majors (http://health.uncc.edu/public-health-science-minor).

STUDENTS

The Department has experienced extraordinary growth: between 2002 and 2010 the number of students enrolled among all its academic programs increased from about 90, to over 500. Currently, the Department serves 137 graduate students, 82 BSPH majors, 283 pre-majors, and 315 minors. The BSPH program is currently configured to accept 40-45 new students each year, and the program is operating near capacity. Managing the internship experience in particular (a singular and especially valuable element of the curriculum) – even in a city the size of Charlotte with large numbers of health-related organizations, agencies, and non-profits – is a challenge. Students initially declare the pre-public health major, apply to the BSPH major during spring of their second year, and enter the two-year upper division program as juniors during fall semester only. Admission to the
BSPH program is competitive: the past two years, acceptance rates are near 50%. Our student retention rate is close to 100%; our program graduation rate is over 90%.

LESSONS LEARNED

First, while aware of the interest in public health, we did not anticipate fully the mismatch between student demand and available faculty resources. Second, the challenge of identifying students with both strong academic potential and demonstrated commitment to public health practice remains unsolved. Third, broad campus support and potential linkages were an unexpected surprise. Fourth, we initially underestimated the administrative and faculty demands needed to develop and sustain internship sites, and to collect and manage the multiple data points needed for effective program monitoring and evaluation especially in terms of ongoing accreditation activities. Finally, the importance of community stakeholder support cannot be undervalued.

Our goals include creating North Carolina’s second accredited School of Public Health. To this end, the Department of Public Health Sciences favors collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and embraces the University’s core values encouraging diversity and equal educational and employment opportunities throughout the University community. The Department is committed to academic excellence. Our excellence is rooted in the competence of our highly collegial faculty and staff; support from the university’s administrative leadership; expert peer review; and the understanding and enthusiasm of our community partners including advisory board members, part-time instructors, and internship preceptors. Welcome the advice and guidance from the community, campus-wide collaborations and partnerships, and administration’s support and contributions. And maintain a steadfast commitment to excellence.