

Peering into the future of public health teaching



The first school of public health in the USA was established just 100 years ago, and much has changed over the past century. The first public health graduates were physicians and nurses who sought specialised training to address public health crises of the time, such as tuberculosis, influenza, and gastrointestinal disorders. Today's graduates tackle issues such as disaster preparedness, vaccine-preventable diseases, the opioid crisis, gun violence, and structural racism.

The societal needs of public health are changing rapidly. The health of populations is increasingly shaped by new and different social movements, technological advances, and new political systems. Today's graduates face a markedly different world than did their teachers, and education has a responsibility to keep up with these changes. Students are more diverse than ever, coming to public health education from a broad range of disciplines with ever more heterogeneous interests. Cognitive science has advanced, and we know better how people learn. This latter evolution comes against a backdrop of a new generation of students who have grown up with digital technology.

To respond to these new challenges, in 2014, the Framing the Future taskforce of the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health provided a blueprint for the next 100 years of public health education.¹ Schools and programmes of public health around the world are updating or considering updating their curricula. We propose three principles that are crucial in shaping change in public health curricula around the world.

First, public health teaching is increasingly focused on the development of authentic, practical, and relevant competencies. This approach is not at the expense of foundational knowledge, but rather in addition to a strong foundation in the core principles of public health. Schools and programmes are using active, integrated, cross-disciplinary, case-based, and project-based pedagogical approaches. The goal is to prepare graduates to apply knowledge and skills to create solutions for complex problems with professional confidence.

Second, public health education is increasingly inclusive, designed to engage students from diverse backgrounds with different strengths, experiences, and learning styles to achieve high levels of learning and skill

development. Students learn better when they connect new knowledge and skills to previous knowledge, and schools and programmes are creating opportunities for engagement through collaborative, team-based, and inter-professional projects that support learners with tailored resources within and outside of the classroom. This trend will undoubtedly accelerate in coming years. As the world urbanises and diversifies, there are going to be more, not less, diverse student bodies sharing learning opportunities. The importance of engaging multiple disciplines in the challenges facing public health means that it will no longer be possible to work without considering clinical medicine, engineering, and urban planning, to name but a few key fields.

Finally, public health education is ongoing. Today's successful public health professionals need skills, knowledge, and talent—not learned once and done, but over a lifetime. Schools and programmes are meeting these needs through more flexible learning strategies, whether formal and informal, both for alumni and for other professionals seeking specific competencies. Schools are starting to explore the potential of digital education and new educational modalities (eg, MicroMasters degrees) that are slowly beginning to carve out a place alongside the more traditional public health armamentarium.

As the future of graduate public health teaching unfolds, the challenge shall be not in thinking about new ideas, but in letting go of old habits and practices such as teacher-centred approaches and exclusive reliance on time spent in the classroom. Public health teaching that evolves with the times has a unique opportunity to prepare students to tackle challenges to the health of populations over the coming decades.

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1 Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health. Framing the future. <https://www.aspph.org/teach-research/framing-the-future/> (accessed April 30, 2018).