

Integrating Women's Health into Schools of Public Health Curricula

Introduction

Women, it is said, hold up half the sky. Healthy women hold up a healthy world: they nurture and improve their own health and well-being, and that of children, families, and communities. Now, more than ever, health leaders recognize the critical need to integrate women's health into public health programs. To this end, schools of public health nationwide are focusing on effective strategies to integrate women's health into their curricula. Women's health issues are central to efforts that improve public health; interdisciplinary and interprofessional collaboration are key to such efforts.¹ A 2001 report by the Institute of Medicine noted that such collaboration is the cornerstone to improving quality and creating patient-centered care.²

Indeed, for more than 20 years, efforts have been underway to enhance health professionals' knowledge and skills about women's health and health care. Studies of existing strategies and recommendations for improving training curricula were commissioned for medicine (1997), dentistry (1999), baccalaureate nursing (2001), pharmacy (2005) and public health (2005), and various universities and professional organizations undertook projects to address deficiencies and challenges.

At the same time, the Centers of Excellence in Women's Health Program (1995-2007; Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's

Action Items for Integrating Women's Health in Curricula

- Analyze women's health content common across all health professions
- Create a service learning elective with ties to women's health
- Create interdepartmental programs in women's health
- Create interprofessional core competencies in women's health
- Engage in interprofessional simulation exercises
- Establish women's health clerkships and fellowships
- Outline general and specialty women's health curriculum across disciplines
- Secure additional funding for curricula initiatives*

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Office of Women's Health. Women's health curricula: Final report on expert panel recommendations for interprofessional collaborations across the Health Professions. Rockville, Maryland: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013.*

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Office of Women's Health. Women's health curricula: Final report on expert panel recommendations for interprofessional collaborations across the health professions. Rockville, Maryland: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013.

² Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2001.

Health) brought focus and resources to promoting and understanding interdisciplinary health services for women. These efforts included bolstering professional education to include women's health.

More recently, to continue to advance existing and evolving efforts forward, the Health Resources and Services Administration's Office of Women's Health, undertook two special projects. One involved preparing an up-to-date description of national efforts to improve the integration of women's health content into health professional curricula. The project convened an expert panel to make recommendations for stimulating further progress.

The second project involved competitively funding five schools of public health to supplement their 5- year Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) Leadership Education in Maternal and Child Health training grant. The supplemental funding supported programs to develop and test innovative, mentored women's health-related projects aimed at improving graduate student understanding of women's health, and supporting institutional commitment to women's health. Grantees developed or enhanced efforts that:

"When these issues are given a face and a name instead of a chapter in a book, it renews my passion to serve the people we work with."—USF student

- created experiential learning opportunities for public health graduate students (University of Arizona and University of South Florida)
- fostered new didactic learning opportunities (University of North Carolina)
- integrated women's health material into existing courses (Boston University and Harvard School of Public Health).

This brief offers a snapshot of the process and outcomes of the five projects, with the hope that their experiences might inform efforts at other schools of public health in advancing women's health within their curriculum. Recognizing that there have been substantial efforts to bolster professional education and interprofessional initiatives specific to women's health across all of the MCHB-funded training programs, this brief also includes current information on women's health course curricula offered by the thirteen MCHB-funded SPH grantees.

Women’s Health Related Courses in the 13 MCH-funded Schools of Public Health

Given the saliency of the “life course” approach to women’s health, the 13 federally-funded MCH Training Programs in Schools of Public Health plan and deliver graduate public health training in three distinct but overlapping spheres -- 1) non-reproductive women’s/gender health; 2) reproductive health; and 3) MCH perinatal health. In 2013, all 13 programs offered at least one full course in each of the three areas. Beyond this baseline, there is substantial variation in the scope, number, and mix of courses related to women’s health across the lifespan among the funded programs.

	Non-reproductive Women’s/Gender Health	Reproductive Health	MCH Perinatal Health
Range of Courses Offered	1 to 9	1 to 7	1 to 7
Median*	~4 Courses	~4 Courses	~3 Courses

* Approximation due to course area overlap.

Examples of course titles in the sphere of Non-reproductive Women’s/Gender Health that extend beyond basic survey courses on Women’s Health include:

- Women and Health Policy: Gender, Evidence and Politics
- The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Populations
- International Perspectives on Women, Gender, and Health
- Women, Health and Development: Reconciling Science and Policy
- Violence Against Women
- Best Practices in Women’s Health
- Women’s Mental Health
- Women, Health and Aging: Policy Issues

Beyond formal credit-bearing course offerings, a number of these MCH Training Programs organize research groups, and hold special seminars, symposia and workshops specifically focused on women’s/gender health. These special events and initiatives most frequently involve faculty across several schools within the university, such as medicine, nursing, social work, and anthropology.

Service Learning in Girls' Health: *University of Arizona (UAZ)*

Description. Middle-school aged girls face great opportunities and terrific risks as they navigate the transition from childhood to adolescence. At the same time, graduate public health students face a transition from academic life to professional experience. The UAZ Service Learning in Girls' Health project aimed to provide both groups opportunities to learn and cultivate skills for use in real-world settings. The College of Public Health teamed with the Center of Excellence in Women's Health to implement the program.

Design. Project leaders recruited graduate students to serve as Group Leaders in a program for sixth-grade girls in a suburban school district. The leaders met with participants once a week as part of the Sixth Grade Girls Club (using an evidence-based curriculum). Because women's health is impacted by cultural, social, and psychological factors, the curriculum addresses a range of domains, including decision-making skills, body image, and gender socialization.

Group Leaders participated in their own training process, which included receiving the materials themselves, and then reflecting on its delivery. They also participated in an evaluation process to assess the effect of the program. Leaders received a modest stipend.

Results. As a result of the women's health supplement, the UAZ team was able to:

- Build on a previous service learning project with a new focus on women's health.
- Recruit and train three graduate students to serve as Group Leaders.
- Pair faculty mentors with Group Leaders.
- Implement an evidenced-based curriculum with 10 to 15 girls over a 7 week period.

Women's Health Collaborative – *University of South Florida (USF)*

Description. A service learning project jointly run by staff from the College of Public Health and the College of Medicine, the USF Women's Health Collaborative, provides graduate students with an opportunity to work with underserved and uninsured patients in a clinical setting and evaluate their experience.

"This experience has shown me the hands-on integration between public health and medicine that you cannot get from any book."—USF student

Design. Students are assigned to interdisciplinary teams at the Judeo Christian Health Clinic, whose patients come from rural areas as well as Latin America. Students work directly with patients, and, in weekly roundtables with medical, nursing, social work, and pharmacy students and other instructors, bring a public health perspective to the project. Students gain important experience, not only in patient interactions, but in acquiring data management, evaluation, and leadership skills. Faculty work with six to eight students each semester.

Results. As a result of the funding, USF SPH was able to:

- Add credibility to the project by having funding support by the Office of Women’s Health.
- Hire two student coordinators to coordinate the training and scheduling logistics as well as to liaise between the various partners.
- Train 24 SPH students to become the next generation of leaders working in an interdisciplinary real world setting.

Women’s Integrated Systems for Health (WISH) – *University of North Carolina*

Description. Since 2010, UNC has been developing WISH, a program that aims to integrate and respond to widespread need among both the public and professionals for public health and mental health information. In addition to UNC’s schools of public health and medicine, WISH partners include the NC Institute for Public Health—Southeast Public Health Training Center. The project had conducted focus groups with graduate students in the UNC School of Public Health maternal and child health program to gauge their interest in a new course. University leaders used funding from the Women’s Health Supplement to expand WISH to encompass residential and online education in maternal and child health.

Design. A new seminar course was developed, integrating theory, research literature, and evidence-based practices to promote integrated systems of care for women across the life course. The course aims to engage students in examining the effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of integrated services that better meet the needs of women living with behavioral health problems. The course features a 1-credit, six-week online course, and a 3-credit program based on online lectures and curricula resources.

Results. As a result of the funding, UNC SPH was able to:

- Build on the approaches to graduate education used in the UNC SPH MCH Leadership Training Program’s online Certificate in MCH Leadership and online master’s degree (MPH and MSPH) programs in MCH, to produce and repurpose already planned distance-education training and workforce development tools to include MCH graduate course curricula.
- Offer two new seminar courses focusing on integrating systems of care for women. The 1-credit, fully online course was initially offered as a pilot in Summer Session 2013 with 7 students enrolled and is now available online at any time through the [North Carolina Public Health Institute](#). The 2-credit hybrid course for interdisciplinary residential graduate students is being offered in Spring 2014 and has five students enrolled.
- Provide an opportunity for an MCH Leadership Training Program student to serve as a teaching assistant for the new course.

Eating Disorders Prevention Case-Method Teaching: *Harvard School of Public Health*

Description. Many more girls and women experience eating disorders than do men. These disorders present a significant challenge to the health and well-being of women across the lifespan. Eating disorders reflect a complex interplay of physical and psychological health, and their treatment remains an ongoing clinical challenge. Preventing these disorders presents other challenges, and new opportunities. Faculty at the Harvard School of Public Health, in collaboration with counterparts at Boston Children’s Hospital, launched STRIPED, a public health incubator (Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders).

“I’ve learned not only how vulnerable groups are targeted with misleading images and information about cosmetic procedures but also a lot about what lawmakers could do to protect these groups and prevent harm.”
—Boston University Trainee

Design. STRIPED introduces students to eating disorder prevention issues by using real-world case-based examples, written in collaboration with a professional writer.

Rather than creating new courses and driving students to them, case-method teaching is designed for ready integration into existing curricula. Although developing teaching cases is time-consuming, and requires engaging professional (and creative) writers, the cases are ultimately more enduring and ready-made for seamless dissemination to other schools of public health. STRIPED develops a complete case package for each teaching case for dissemination that consists of materials teachers can use to implement a case in their courses, including the main case story narrative; materials to share with students, such as data tables and news stories; homework; classroom activities; and teaching notes with guidance on how to use the materials.³

Results. As a result of the funding, Harvard SPH was able to:

- Hire a professional case writer to introduce eating disorder prevention to SPH students by bringing real-world, case-based examples into the classroom.
- Develop a series of teaching cases including, “Who’s Calling Me Fat? Or, How Columbia Got Its Obesity Prevention Campaign Back On Track,” “‘Retweet Does Not Imply Endorsement’: The Logic of Cyberbullying in Schools,” “” and “The Governor is Very Interested: Or, Cost Effectiveness Analysis for School Health Screening.” STRIPED cases are available online at: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/striped/teaching-cases/>

³ Austin, BS and Sonnevill, KR. Closing the “know-do” gap: training public health professionals in eating disorders prevention via case-method teaching. *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 46:5 533-527 2013

Shaping Young Women's Health: *Boston University School of Public Health*

Description. Many public health students pursue careers that put them in the forefront of advocating for women in public policy. Teaching students how to apply their public health knowledge and expertise in real-world public policy debates is essential. Current politically polarized debates over women's reproductive health illustrate just how essential it is for today's students to understand the intersection of public health science, gender, moral ideology, and politics if they are to be effective leaders and advocates. To this end, Boston University faculty and students developed a 'best practice package' of women's health teaching materials designed to inform and empower young men and women at various stages of their education, professional development, and activism.

Design. The team developed and piloted a three-part 'best practice package' of teaching materials: 1) interactive materials for use on university and community college campuses to inform and empower young women to advocate for health care reform that meets their needs and the needs of their mothers and grandmothers; 2) a two part case study, "The Affordable Care Act and Women's Health: Science, Religion and Politics"; and 3) syllabi and teaching notes for two women's health courses for SPHs, one covering policies that affect women across the lifespan, and the other centered on women's sexual and reproductive health. All materials are designed to strengthen students' skills as effective advocates. The project aimed to bolster student skills in areas such as how to reflect on private and public values, critically analyze arguments and strategies, apply public health evidence to advocacy goals, and frame and support one's arguments to diverse audiences. The materials are grounded in current policy events and were a creative platform to practice real world skills.

Results. As a result of the funding, BU SPH was able to:

- Create a slide show and teaching guides for college campus and community education: "The Affordable Care Act and Young Women's Health."
- Develop and pilot a case study "The Affordable Care Act: How gender, science, religion, and politics intersect to determine women's health care coverage and access."
- Refine and integrate teaching notes into two SPH courses: "Women's Health Policy-making: Gender, Evidence and Politics" and "Sexual and Reproductive Health Advocacy: Science, Religion and Politics."

Lessons Learned

Although each university tested different strategies and materials, all shared similar experiences in terms of opportunities and challenges. Key lessons learned include:

- **Interdisciplinary work is essential.** Schools of public health must build and nurture relationships with other academic programs within their own institutions and with the local community. These relationships can provide the leverage needed to pursue opportunities as they occur, and to have a real effect on women's health.
- **Develop student leadership skills.** Field experiences present an opportunity for students to develop leadership skills. Encouraging students to lead programs and meetings, for instance, helps them to develop confidence as public speakers. Engaging students as practitioners and advocates offers them a chance to actively participate and cultivate leadership skills they'll need throughout their professional careers.
- **Build on institutional strengths.** Schools of public health are expert in educating people—not only the students enrolled in programs, but the people in the community whose lives are touched by their work. Those skills are important, and are the foundation for developing new programs.
- **Meet people where they are.** Building entirely separate programs or courses may not always be feasible or effective. Instead, work to meet faculty and students where they are by developing materials that can be incorporated into existing curricula, and delivered in the classroom.

Such work will not be without challenges, and grantees encountered several. In particular, grantees addressed common challenges.

- **When necessary, seek external, professional input.** This is especially true in terms of developing the case methods, a process that relies on truly creative, real-world narrative best cast by a professional writer.
- **Be realistic about the time required.** Building field experiences and programs can be a time-consuming process. In developing schedules, be realistic about how much time projects require. If possible, recruit administrative staff who are able to manage such projects.
- **Build on the existing infrastructure.** Rather than establishing an entirely new structure or process, look to existing elements on which to build. This approach is much more cost-effective, especially when resources are limited.

The Future of Integrating Women’s Health into Public Health Curricula

The experiences of the five grantees point the way for future efforts to integrate women’s health into public health curricula. Grantees themselves have many plans to sustain their work, such as:

- Compiling additional teaching resources
- Expanding training beyond their own schools of public health and students to reach a broader audience, sharing materials developed and disseminating them more widely
- Continuing to explore and develop field experiences that give students the real-world interactions essential to their personal and professional development
- Seeking additional funding sources and streams.

A healthy future, and a healthy society, depends on the health, security, and well-being of women and girls. Addressing their particular health challenges is essential, and doing so requires concerted efforts to train the next generation of public health and medical leaders. These projects offer insights and opportunities for other schools of public health to replicate and grow.

For general information on this project, please contact:

Sabrina Matoff-Stepp

HRSA Office of Women’s Health

smatoff-stepp@hrsa.gov

Denise Sofka

Division of MCH Workforce Development

dsofka@hrsa.gov

For more program-specific information, please contact:

University of Arizona

Velia Leybas Nuno, PhD, MSW: vleybas@email.arizona.edu

University of South Florida

Ellen M. Daley, PhD, MPH: edaley@health.usf.edu

University of North Carolina

Anita Farel, DrPH: anita_farel@unc.edu

Harvard School of Public Health

Bryn Austin, ScD: Bryn.Austin@childrens.harvard.edu

Boston University School of Public Health

Lois McCloskey, DrPH: loism@bu.edu