Introduction

Public health refers to a very broad, dynamic, and multidisciplinary field that focuses on improving the health of people and communities through research into illness and injury prevention and through efforts to promote healthy lifestyles and habits. Within the field, there are several areas of specialization which touch upon nearly every facet of daily life. Some examples include:

- the quality of the air we breathe (environmental health)
- having and wearing seat belts in cars (public health policy and health education)
- childhood immunizations as well as vaccinations people get before overseas travel (maternal and child health; global health)
- food nutrition labels (nutrition and health education)
- HIV/AIDS (epidemiology, global health, and health education)

The field of public health also has a strong social justice component in its work to reduce health disparities and increase health care equity, quality, and accessibility. As a graduate student of public health you will learn, broadly, about the issues that affect population health and, through a more focused lens of a concentration within the field, how to address and prevent the health problems that arise within a community.

In contrast to clinical health professional degrees such as a Medical Doctorate (MD) or Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS) with their emphasis on the treatment of individuals, a graduate
A degree in public health focuses on disease prevention and health promotion of a wider population. Clinical health professionals usually provide health care to an individual on an as-needed basis, whereas public health professionals are continually working towards improving the health of the community, which is affected by a variety of factors at any given time.

**Main public health specializations**

Due to the breadth of the public health field, study and work within the field is divided into areas of specialization. While graduate schools of public health may differ in their specialization offerings and what they call them, the Association of Schools of Public Health's special website outlines major areas of public health study as follows:

**Behavioral science/Health education**

Also called social and behavioral sciences and community health education, this area of specialization focuses on how human behavior affects health, and how to influence human behavior to promote healthier lifestyles. Behavioral scientists in public health may study why people engage in risky activities such as unsafe sex in order to help health educators reduce sexually transmitted diseases.

**Biostatistics**

The science of transforming biological data into knowledge about biological processes. Biostatisticians can be found working in and contributing to every area of public health including clinical medicine, epidemiological studies, environmental health, health services, and public policy. Biostatistics can help predict the number of immunizations needed for influenza each year and provide insights into the relationship between drinking and car accidents.

**Environmental health**

Also grouped with occupational health, environmental health is the study of the impact of the environment, both natural and man-made, on population health. Within this area, there are additional tracks that you may focus on:

- Global ecology, environmental sustainability, and health
- Environmental epidemiology
- Environmental exposures and risk assessment
- Community-based environmental health and justice

**Epidemiology**

The study of the frequency, distribution, and determinants of disease in human populations. Students of this area of specialization learn to analyze public health trends, design and implement studies, and interpret study results for policy and program development. Often used in tandem with biostatistics, epidemiologists can help track the source and control the spread of diseases such as H1N1 (swine flu).

**Health services administration/management**

The science of effectively managing and delivering health care services in an organizational setting. You may be able to concentrate in one of these areas:

- Health policy
- Health care management
- Pharmaceutical policy and administration

**International/Global health**

The study of global health problems and disparities, particularly in underserved populations. This specialization is broad in nature as it takes a global view of all the areas in health as well as issues that affect the health of a population including culture, economics, and policy. Schools may provide further focus to students by having regional, population, or specific issue area concentrations. For example, the University of Auckland, New Zealand offers courses on Maori health.

**Maternal and child health**

The study of public health issues as it pertains to the health and wellness of women and children. You may focus on the following areas:

- Reproductive and women's health
- Child and adolescent health
- Maternal and child health epidemiology
- Family and community health
- Policymaking and advocacy for women, children, and families

**Nutrition**

The study of the role of food and nutrients in the health of a population. Nutritionists use their knowledge to promote healthier lifestyles and populations through better diets and disease prevention.
Pursuing public health graduate studies will be a way to help and Human Development (2002), says, New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, Damian J. Denson, MPH Community Health Education from will be many opportunities to tackle emerging and existing challenges in new ways, to do good work, and to grow professionally.

Examples of additional areas of specialty that are offered by graduate schools of public health include:

- Health law, bioethics, and human rights (Boston University School of Public Health)  
  www.sph.bu.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=62&Itemid=90
- Global environmental health (Emory University Rollins School of Public Health)  
  www.sph.emory.edu/GLOBAL/index.php
- Tropical medicine (Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine)  
  www.sph.tulane.edu/tropmed/index.htm
- Veterinary public health (University of Minnesota School of Public Health)  
  www.sph.umn.edu/education/vph/home.html

Why a graduate degree in public health?

Studying public health formally will give you a comprehensive understanding of the different public health specializations and, within your specialty, the skills to be a competent practitioner, researcher, or academic. A graduate education in public health is designed to be very practical, (or theoretical, depending on your interests) preparing you to develop, acquire, and use health information and knowledge to promote health from the individual to population level. Because public health is an interdisciplinary field and approaches population health in a holistic manner, there will be many opportunities to tackle emerging and existing challenges in new ways, to do good work, and to grow professionally.

Damian J. Denson, MPH Community Health Education from New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development (2002), says,

I think newcomers to Public Health should realize that it is still an emerging field. There are a myriad of opportunities within the degree programs, i.e. [Epidemiology], Policy, Education so it is important to know your niche.

Pursuing public health graduate studies will be a way to help advance your career in the direction you want, whether you are just starting out or have experience in the field. If you are relatively new to or transitioning into public health, graduate study will give you a strong foundation in the knowledge and skills necessary to establish yourself within the field. That said, be aware that certain public health areas tend to expect a fair amount of experience from applicants, while other specializations—for instance, Epidemiology and Biostatistics—tend to be welcoming to people new to the field, given their importance as foundational classes for the field.

If you are a mid-career public health professional, a graduate education can give you the extra training necessary to take your career to the next level, for example, Health Care Management. If you continue to work professionally during grad school, the education you receive may be directly applicable to your day-to-day work.

Furthermore, your classmates will come from a variety of professions and share your passion for public health. Having this degree demonstrates a professional commitment to, and the background to become a leader in your given specialty. As Yvette P. Conley, an alumna of University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health Ph.D. Human Genetics says, “If you want to be an independent researcher instead of moving forward the research agenda of others—get your Ph.D.”

Establishing goals for your graduate study

As you can see from the discussions above, the field of public health is broad. Adding to the immensity of the field itself, there are many schools with public health programs and, within each program, a number of different specializations. If you’re interested in graduate education in public health, you’ll have to dig deeper to narrow your focus as most schools of public health will require you to choose an area of concentration when you apply to their degree programs. Due to the enormous diversity in programs and the various paths toward doing the work you want to do, it is important to keep your goals in mind as you prepare for grad school.

It’s also important to note that while a graduate program in public health will give you a streamlined path towards a career in the field, it isn’t the only way to work on public health issues. Disciplines such as social work, public policy, law, and management are also useful in the field of public health, but if you take one of these routes you may have to specialize in public health either via a certificate or through work experience. When considering a graduate program in public health, keep the follow-

Idealist.org Public Service Graduate Education Resource Center (idealist.org/psgerc)
ing questions in mind:

- **What issues do you want to study for a year or more?**
  When you apply for a graduate program in public health, you will most likely have to indicate the concentration you want to specialize in. The concentration will shape what you study after completing the general public health core requirements. Are you more interested in learning about issues that affect disease prevention and control, or how the environment impacts community health? Ask yourself which issues you are most drawn to and why. As you research programs pay close attention to how the program concentrations are described and structured in various schools to see which approach most resonates with your interests.

- **What tasks do you enjoy? What tasks interest you?**
  Do you enjoy working with people? Or data? Do you like to travel? Do you prefer managing projects or people? Determining which tasks you enjoy, from day-to-day, will also help you figure out which public health program of study will be the best fit for you. If you like crunching numbers and analyzing data, a program that offers a strong biostatistics concentration may be of interest to you. If you prefer working directly with people at the community level, you may want to look into the health education concentration.

- **What skills do you want to gain or hone?**
  Grad school is not just a time to deepen your understanding of an issue, but also a chance to broaden your skill sets. If you have experience working in the community, a Masters in Public Health with a policy concentration may help you apply your grassroots experience to crafting and implementing health policy. If you want to move towards managing an organization, the health administration concentration will teach you about organizational development, fundraising, and leadership.

- **What other programs or interests do you want to combine with a degree in public health?**
  You may find that your interests are not completely satisfied by the public health concentration you choose, or that you want to distinguish yourself from others in the field. If so, a certificate or dual/joint degree in another field may suit you. For example, if you want to work on global health rights, you may be interested in doing a dual degree in international health and law. Or if you want to focus specifically on nutrition within maternal and child health, you may want to look for programs that offer a certificate in nutrition. Check with the graduate programs you research to see if they have the options or flexibility to help you explore your interests. You may also be able to take elective classes in other departments.

Once you’ve answered these questions, you’ll have a much clearer vision of your goals for graduate study in public health. As one Brown University Program in Public Health alum says, you should have a good idea of what focus you would like your degree to have. Graduate core curriculum is still quite general and it is especially helpful if you have an idea of what you want to study to be able to pick the most appropriate classes and internships and make the best connections as early as possible.

Having a clear vision of your grad school goals will help you hone in on programs that fit your goals, deliver a convincing application, choose which school to enroll in, and, eventually, select your courses and internship experiences.

- Read our article about good reasons to go to grad school [www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/goodreasons.html](http://www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/goodreasons.html)

**Joint degrees**

You don’t necessarily have to choose between degrees. Stephanie Uiga, Graduate Student Affairs Officer at University of California, Irvine Program in Public Health says,

Students should not necessarily choose between medical school and public health. There are many schools that offer joint or combined programs. Having health credentials and a degree in public health may be especially advantageous in the job market in terms of opening up new opportunities. A hospital may require a program director or manager to have health credentials [e.g. be a doctor or nurse] to work in the hospital, but that person may have a difficult time running a program without the skills offered by an MPH.

As Stephanie points out, there are many joint programs, and not just with public health and clinical health. Some typical joint, or dual, degree combinations with public health are social work, law, medicine, nursing, dentistry, occupational therapy, public policy, management (business, health administration, nonprofit), and international affairs.

If, however, time is of the essence, you may also consider that the field of public health offers many educational options with varying timelines for completion, whereas other fields (such as clinical health or law) may not offer the same sort of flexibil-
Degree Overview: Public Health

Idealist.org Public Service Graduate Education Resource Center (idealist.org/psgerc)

Many schools of public health offer certificate, continuing education, executive, intensive learning institutes (usually the summer, sometimes winter, as with Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health [www.jhsphedu]), online/distance, and part-time programs that you can complete in as little as a few months to two years. Read more about public health certificate options in the “What about a certificate?” section below.

Most traditional, full-time masters of public health (MPH) programs will require two years of study to complete the degree. While one-year programs also exist, they often require a prior graduate degree.

Learn more about the benefits of a certificate
Learn about the benefits of a joint-degree

Skills you can gain

A graduate education in any field will give you a strong foundation in research (quantitative and/or qualitative), writing, critical thinking, and the ability to apply your knowledge to your work. As a graduate student of public health you will also gain skills in and knowledge of:

- Biostatistics
- Statistical analysis
- Epidemiologic methodology
- Health management
- Project coordination and management
- Program planning, implementation, administration, and evaluation

In addition to getting a strong grounding in the field of public health, depending on your area of concentration, you may gain these skills:

- Database management
- Public speaking and communication skills
- Interviewing and charting skills
- Budgeting and financial management
- Grantwriting
- Statistical analysis
- Policy development and analysis
- Survey writing
- Community assessment

Other names for a degree in this area

As you research public health graduate degrees, you will come across many options. Here are some of the common degree offerings in public health specializations that you may find across schools of public health:

- Biostatistics (MPH, M.S., Ph.D.)
- Environmental health sciences (MPH, M.S., DSc, Ph.D.)
- Epidemiology (MPH, M.S., SM, DSc, Ph.D.)
- Health services administration/management (MPH, M.S., SM, DSc, DrPH, Ph.D.)
- International health (MPH, SM, DrPH, SD)
- Maternal and child health (MPH, DrPH)

The standard professional graduate degrees to become a practitioner in the field are the Masters (MPH) and Doctorate in Public Health (DrPH), which usually requires an MPH and, in some cases, another masters in your area of specialty.

The DrPH will also prepare you to do research. While this article only discusses these two degrees broadly, you will notice that different graduate schools offer similar yet distinct research degrees, Masters (MSPH) and/or Doctorate of Science (DScPH), Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.D.), or Masters of Health Science (MHS), in the specialty areas of public health. (To add to the alphabet soup of degree acronyms, Harvard University uses ‘SM’ for Masters of Science and ‘SD’ for Doctorate of Science.)

These degrees prepare you for more research-focused professions within public health, and the doctoral level degrees (of public health, science, and philosophy) can also help you establish a career in academia.

Health services administration/management is also offered as its own degree in many schools of public health.

What about a certificate?

A certificate in public health can be a valuable alternative to a graduate degree depending on your goals and circumstances, although it should be noted that they are not so commonly offered at schools of public health.

In general, there are two types of certificate in public health:

- Executive level: Intended for a professional with significant experience and background in public health who needs additional training in the field. These certificate programs are usually short, intensive courses (over the weekend, a week in the summer) with focused topics. Employers will often pay for the course for their employees. For example, a physician may take a certificate course paid
for by her hospital to learn more about how information technology strategies can be used to better manage patient care.

- Junior level: Intended for an individual new to the field with little or no experience. These certificate courses are meant to expose the student to a variety of foundational topics in public health but will not be as comprehensive or rigorous as the executive level certificate courses or a graduate program. For example, an undergraduate student or recent graduate may take a certificate course at the university to determine if they want to pursue a masters level program.

Some examples of specialty certificates offered by public health graduate programs include:

- International health
- Maternal and child health
- Public health genetics
- Food protection
- Preparedness, response, and recovery
- Public health informatics
- Basic clinical research methods
- Advanced clinical research methods
- Health management
- Public health laboratory practice

In terms of benefits, a general or more specialized public health graduate certificate can:

- introduce you to and give you a better understanding of the theoretical framework of public health or an area of specialty
- help enhance your professional skill set and academic training
- provide an alternative to a degree program, either full- or part-time, if you have limited time and/or financial resources to commit
- allow you to network with other public health professionals
- give you the opportunity to test out coursework before committing to a degree program
- help you transition into public health without committing to a degree program
- increase your knowledge if you already have an advanced degree and do not want to commit to another degree program
- provide an introduction to and better understanding of public health as a volunteer, board member, community member, current graduate student pursuing another degree with the option to specialize, or a professional who works with the public health system although not in it

» Learn more about the benefits of a certificate

**What can you expect to find in a program?**

Students who want to study public health at an advanced level can choose from a great variety of program designs and offerings based on their professional development needs and interests.

**General structure of programs**

Most traditional full-time masters of public health programs run for two years, although international graduate programs such as at the University of Auckland, New Zealand ([www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/faculty/postgrad/programmes/mph.aspx](http://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/faculty/postgrad/programmes/mph.aspx)) or the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine ([www.lshtm.ac.uk/prospectus/masters/msph.html](http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/prospectus/masters/msph.html)) are usually only one year long. At the Boston University School of Public Health ([www.sph.bu.edu](http://www.sph.bu.edu)) and Tufts University School of Medicine Public Health and Professional Degrees programs ([www.tufts.edu/med/education/phpd/index.html](http://www.tufts.edu/med/education/phpd/index.html)), an MPH degree may be completed in as little as three full-time semesters.

**Alternative structures**

For mid-career professionals looking for an advanced program of study, some schools offer executive programs. Executive programs allow students who fulfill a minimum work experience and or education requirement to complete the graduate degree in a condensed and/or more flexible schedule, usually one year full-time or two years part-time. Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health offers an Executive Master of Public Health in Health Care Management ([www.mailman.hs.columbia.edu/hpm/emph/index.htm](http://www.mailman.hs.columbia.edu/hpm/emph/index.htm)) for busy public health professionals in which classes meet one weekend per month for two years.

Harvard School of Public Health offers programs ([www.hsph.harvard.edu/academics/catalog/academic-summer-program/](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/academics/catalog/academic-summer-program/)) for working professionals that include a combination of a series of executive weekend classes and summer sessions (or only summer sessions). While not explicitly for working public health professionals, the University of California at Berkeley School of Public Health offers an 11-month ([http://sph.berkeley.edu/students/degrees/programs/11moMPH.php](http://sph.berkeley.edu/students/degrees/programs/11moMPH.php)) MPH program for individuals who already have a masters or doctoral-level degree from an accredited institution.
Part-time and online programs are also ideal for working or mid-career professionals who prefer to pursue their degree in the evenings and on weekends while continuing to work during the day. Online, or distance, programs are a good option especially for people who don’t have a local school of public health and may not be able to travel for extra training, and yet want access to further education. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health is an example of a school that offers online/distance (http://distance.jhsph.edu) and part-time (www.jhsph.edu/academics/degreetprograms/mph/prospective_students/part_time.html) graduate education options.

Other schools of public health offer accelerated joint degree programs for undergraduates and graduate students who are looking to optimize their time in school by completing two degrees in a shorter period of time. Brown University Program in Public Health offers five-year MD/MPH (http://bms.brown.edu/pubhealth/mph/md) and five-year AB (Bachelor of Arts)/MPH (http://bms.brown.edu/commhealth/ab) joint degree programs to students.

» Read “Going to grad school part-time” to learn more about some pros and cons of part-time study www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/goingparttime.html

Usual coursework and concentrations

The public health graduate curriculum is divided into core foundational courses, more focused concentration (specialization) work, and elective classes. At accredited schools of public health the core curriculum must include courses that give you a foundation in five knowledge areas essential to the study of public health:
• Biostatistics
• Epidemiology
• Environmental health sciences
• Health services administration
• Social and behavioral sciences

Depending on their mission and goals, schools may include additional courses in their core curriculum such as:
• Biological basis of disease
• Ethical issues in public health

Note: A school’s curriculum may meet Council on Education of Public Health accreditation standards without actually being accredited. Read more about accreditation of schools and programs of public health in the “Accreditation” section below.

Here are some sample core curricula from schools of public health:
» Brown University Program in Public Health http://bms.brown.edu/pubhealth/mph/courses.php
» Drexel University http://publichealth.drexel.edu/Academics/Courses_and_Methods/Core_Course_Descriptions/68/
» University College Dublin School of Public Health and Population Science www.ucd.ie/phps/postgraduateprogrammes/mph/

Beyond these foundational courses in public health, students at most graduate programs will then have to complete specific course requirements for their chosen concentration within public health. Most public health graduate programs post their course offerings online for prospective students to view. Taking a look at the curriculum for the program you are interested in will give you a clearer sense of how your graduate education will be structured and what you will be learning. Comparing the curricula will also help you determine which program may be a better fit for your interests. Below is a listing, by concentration, of some of the typical curricula, with a link to a school that offers information about their courses:

Behavioral science/health education
• Cultural competence and health disparities
• Principles and leadership in health education
• Policy issues
• Program development and evaluation
• Nutrition
• Addiction
• Social marketing
• Community needs assessment

Sample course offerings from:
» Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health www.jhsph.edu/academics/degreetprograms/mph/prospective_students/social_behavioral_sciences.html
» University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Public Health Education www.uncg.edu/phe/curriculum.html

Biostatistics
• Advanced biostatistics
• Research and data management
• Data analysis including various statistical computing programs such as SAS, SPSS
• Research methodology
- Advanced epidemiology

Sample course offerings from:

- Harvard School of Public Health
  www.hsph.harvard.edu/registrar/courses/bio.shtml
- University of Michigan School of Public Health
  www.sph.umich.edu/iscr/caid/display_current_dept.cfm?DepartmentID=1

Environmental health
- Food quality assurance
- Outdoor and indoor air quality assurance
- Water quality assurance
- Environmental toxicology
- Environmental risk assessment
- Hazardous waste management
- Industrial hygiene

Sample course offerings from:

- Drexel University School of Public Health Environmental and Occupational Health curriculum
  http://publichealth.drexel.edu/Departments/Environmental_Occupational_Health/Courses_Environmental_Occupational_Health/672/
- Emory Rollins School of Public Health
  www.sph.emory.edu/eho/courses.php

Epidemiology
- Advanced biostatistics
- Infectious and chronic diseases
- Pathology
- Genetics
- Cancer epidemiology
- Cardiovascular disease epidemiology
- Social and psychiatric epidemiology

Sample course offerings from:

- Boston University School of Public Health
  http://spbu.edu/index.php?option=com_courselist&task=view&deptid=1&id=168&right=0&Itemid=668&sectionid=5&categoryid=115
- University of California, Los Angeles, School of Public Health Department of Epidemiology
  www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/courses.html

International health
- Health and economic development
- HIV/AIDS
- International health policy
- Public nutrition, food security

- Population studies
- Disaster and risk management
- Global health systems

Sample course offerings from:

- Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine
  www.sph.tulane.edu/main/academics/courses/cour_ihd.htm
- University of New South Wales School of Public Health and Community Medicine

Maternal and child health
- Child and adolescent health and development
- Women's and couples' reproductive health
- Family planning
- Health advocacy and policy
- Human nutrition

Sample course offerings from:

- Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Child and Adolescent Health concentration
  www.jhsph.edu/academics/degreeprograms/mph/prospective_students/child_adolescent_health.html
- Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Women's and Reproductive Health concentration
  www.jhsph.edu/academics/degreeprograms/mph/prospective_students/womens_reproductive_health.html
- University of Minnesota School of Public Health
  www.sph.umn.edu/education/mch/curriculum/home.html

Nutrition
- Nutrition science
- Community and public nutrition
- Nutrition, food security, and economic development
- Nutritional epidemiology
- Health communication
- Nutrition in disease treatment and prevention
- Nutrition in life stages

Sample course offerings from:

- Tufts University School of Public Health
  www.tufts.edu/med/education/phpd/mph/concentrations/nutrition/courses.html
- University of Washington School of Public Health curriculum
  http://depts.washington.edu/nutr/ProspectiveMPH.html
Public health policy

- Cost-effective health policy analysis
- Managing health care organizations
- Survey of the U.S. health care system
- Health care financial accounting
- Public health law
- Leadership

Sample course offerings from:

- University of Albany School of Public Health
  [www.albany.edu/sph/academicprograms/mph.htm#health](http://www.albany.edu/sph/academicprograms/mph.htm#health)

- University of Michigan School of Public Health
  [www.sph.umich.edu/iscr/caid/display_current_dept.cfm?DepartmentID=5](http://www.sph.umich.edu/iscr/caid/display_current_dept.cfm?DepartmentID=5)

- Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health has a searchable directory of courses across public health departments at
  [www.mailmanschool.org/courses](http://www.mailmanschool.org/courses)

Other specialties in public health

Keep in mind that some schools of public health have a unique focus such as:

- Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine
  [www.sph.tulane.edu/main/overview/overview.htm](http://www.sph.tulane.edu/main/overview/overview.htm)

- University of North Carolina, Greensboro School of Health, Department of Public Health Education
  [www.uncg.edu/phe/](http://www.uncg.edu/phe/)

- Drexel University School of Public Health Program for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health

- University of Auckland, New Zealand’s courses on Maori health

Schools and programs of public health that have a specific focus may offer especially distinct courses and opportunities that match your interests and let you develop further expertise in those areas.

- Read the benefits of working part-time while studying

- Read the challenges of working full-time while studying full-time

Graduation requirements

Field experience. The masters and doctorate of public health are practical degrees, meaning what you learn in the classroom should apply to work in the field. Almost all programs require a practicum or capstone so that you have an opportunity to apply the education you’ve received by addressing a real issue and need in the community, helping to demonstrate your competence in the field. Field experience is usually garnered through a project or internship with local, national or international agency and organization, and culminates in a written report or presentation.

Your field experiences will depend on your degree specialization, interests, and initiative. Below are several examples of field work as well as how students located their projects:

Damian J. Denson, MPH Community Health Education, New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development 2002, did “a semester-long internship at an AIDS service organization in Atlanta, GA. It was a program requirement that I was allowed to set up in another city away from the university. I set up communication with the organization ED, my Advisor, and myself throughout the internship. I completed a field experience report at its completion.”

Raghupathy Anchala, MD, received his MPH in Infectious Diseases and Microbiology at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health in 2008. He interned at the Chest Research Foundation in Pune, India, where he helped conduct research for a “study to compare the efficacy and safety of salbutamol versus ipratropium in varying degrees of asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. [The] school appreciated my efforts by giving me a chance [to do] a poster presentation for peer reviews and feedback.”

A 2008 alumnus of the Brown University Program in Public Health says she had “an internship that provided great experience in health policy. I found it myself through contacts within my public health program—but I was the one who pursued and cultivated the relationship and was able to work out an internship where one had not previously existed.”

Stephanie Uiga, Graduate Student Affairs Officer at University of California, Irvine Program in Public Health ([www.cohs.uci.edu/publichealth/pubhealth.asp?](http://www.cohs.uci.edu/publichealth/pubhealth.asp?)) says,

Our MPH is a practical degree that teaches students how to solve health problems in the field while maintaining the professionalism and leadership skills needed to function within an organization and to communicate across disciplines. Also, the practicum field experience is invaluable in helping students to obtain employment after graduation, particularly if the applicant has little to no previous experience working in the field.
Thesis or dissertation. Some programs require students to write a thesis (for masters candidates) or a dissertation (for doctoral candidates). These papers are documents that present the author’s research and findings and are submitted in support of candidacy for a degree or professional qualification.

As you explore schools of public health, you may also be able to browse the practicum, thesis, or dissertation topics of past students. Here are a few links to some public health graduate work:

- A variety of capstone topics and papers from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health: [www.jhsph.edu/academics/degreeprograms/mph/current_students/capstone_examples](http://www.jhsph.edu/academics/degreeprograms/mph/current_students/capstone_examples)
- Biostatistics dissertations from 1947-present at Harvard School of Public Health: [www.hsph.harvard.edu/biostats/publications/dissertations/](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/biostats/publications/dissertations/)
- Epidemiology dissertations from University of California, Berkeley School of Public Health graduates: [http://epi.berkeley.edu/Dissertations.html](http://epi.berkeley.edu/Dissertations.html)

Students of executive or part-time public health programs who are full- or part-time working professionals have the benefit of applying what they learn in class to their daily work and may not be required to complete a practicum.

- Read the challenges of working full-time while studying full-time: [www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/workstudyft.html](http://www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/workstudyft.html)

Accreditation

The Council on Education of Public Health (CEPH) ([www.ceph.org](http://www.ceph.org)) is the accrediting body for public health schools and certain related programs not housed in public health schools, including some outside of the United States. It is an independent nonprofit corporation recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

CEPH was founded in 1974 by the American Public Health Association (APHA) ([www.apha.org](http://www.apha.org)) and the Association of Schools of Public Health (ASPH) ([www.asph.org](http://www.asph.org)) to take over the responsibility of reviewing and accrediting public health schools.

Schools and programs voluntarily apply for accreditation to CEPH. As founding members of CEPH, APHA and ASPH councilors provide guidance on establishing, monitoring, and revising its accreditation criteria. These criteria ensure the quality of a public health education by setting a wide range of standards.

Also bear in mind that a school’s curriculum may meet CEPH standards without the school itself being CEPH accredited.

- Learn more about the Council on Education of Public Health and its accreditation process: [www.ceph.org](http://www.ceph.org)

Students and faculty

Your classmates will be a reflection of the public health program in which you are enrolled. For example, if you’re in a part-time or executive program, you’ll study alongside mid-career professionals, many of whom are likely in (or transitioning into) the field of public health. If you’re in a more traditional program, your class may be more diverse, including students who are relatively new to the field, with some experience volunteering, working in a nonprofit or governmental organization, or participating in a national service program. Most likely, the majority will have at least a few years of work experience and bring varied perspectives and skills to the classroom. If you’re in a doctoral level program, your classmates will be, like you, emerging academic leaders and/or practitioners in your area of research.

Your faculty will have extensive knowledge of and experience in public health as practitioners and researchers. Many will also be very active in organizations across sectors as consultants, board members, or even current staff. Likely they will be recognized as leaders in their field.

As you look into schools, pay special attention to the research interests and professional experiences of faculty—for better or for worse, their connections, areas of knowledge, and opinions will shape the direction of your education, if not your career.

The culture that students, faculty, and administration together create is a key part of grad school. As Jessica Federer, MPH Health Policy and Administration Yale School of Public Health, 2008, notes,

"My graduate experience at YSPH was greatly enhanced by the ‘non-classroom’ experiences—this includes working with outstanding professors, collaborating with students in other disciplines, and more generally, having the opportunity to make relationships with people who are talented and passionate about their work."
Who gets this degree and what do they go on to do?

Prior experience

Most schools of public health strongly recommend, and some require, between three to five years of work experience and/or demonstrated interest in the field.

Prior work experience in any sector will help define your professional interest and goals before entering into a graduate program, affecting how you approach your studies—from the classes you take to the types of learning opportunities you look for in and out of class—and ultimately helping you to get the most return on investment in your education.

Jeffery Dubinski, Admissions Officer at Boston University School of Public Health (http://sph.bu.edu) says,

For applicants coming to BUSPH directly out of their undergrad programs, we encourage them to gain experience in a public health setting by volunteering, completing an internship, or finding a job after graduating. This will help them be able to relate practical experiences to what they will learn in the classroom. For mid-career or career changers, we ask them to highlight some different parts of their application. As a career changer, what transferable skills are you bringing to the program and the field of Public Health? Mid-career professionals should highlight why this step of applying to graduate school makes sense at this point in their career and professional development.

An alumnus of the MPH in Urban and Environmental Health at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey School of Public Health (2002) and the DrPH in Behavioral and Community Health Sciences at the University Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health (www.publichealth.pitt.edu) (2008) advises, “Spend time working in the field between completing a masters degree and entering a doctoral program—it will help you focus your career goals and enrich your learning experience.”

If you have not worked professionally in public health, some ways to gain significant experience and insight into issues unique to the field work include:

- Participating in a national or international service program. Programs such as AmeriCorps or AmeriCorps VISTA (www.americorps.gov) offer you a chance to serve in a low-income health clinic, family planning organization, or other setting where you work on public health issues. A non-AmeriCorps program called Health Corps allows recent college graduates an opportunity to serve in high-need public high schools to educate youth about healthy diets and lifestyles as well as preventing obesity and diseases related to poor nutrition (www.healthcorps.net). Peace Corps offers three types of health assignments in developing countries around the world—your education and your experience dictate your eligibility (www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=learn.whatvol.health).
- Sitting on the board of a health-related nonprofit or citizen committee of a local public health-related government agency. This is an opportunity for professionals from any sector to share their expertise, develop fundraising and project management skills, and gain insight into health issues affecting their local communities. Be aware that many nonprofit boards may expect their members to contribute money to the organization. Make sure you know what the minimum expected contribution is, as well as the legal obligations of board service.
- Volunteering. Volunteering your skills for special projects and your time with organizations is another way to explore public health work, e.g., helping to check in blood donors at your local blood bank, acting as a bilingual interpreter for patients at clinics, staffing organization booths at community events, and educating the public about different health matters such as safe sex or potential changes in health legislation.

Career paths

Students of public health use their degree to prepare for and transition into positions at organizations of all sizes across sec-
tors. Some also go on to found their own nonprofits or consultancies. Typical job titles that graduates may qualify for, depending on their concentration and coursework, include:

- Epidemiologist
- Public health director
- Senior research assistant
- Professor or faculty
- Special projects coordinator
- Staff associate
- Statistical analyst
- Primary health care advisor
- Clinical services manager
- Medical officer
- Program administrator
- Executive director

International health graduates find employment in international health organizations, relief agencies, consulting groups, policy research organizations, and other organizations operating abroad.

Others find that their education qualifies them for philanthropic work in the private sector or as consultants to nonprofits.

Neyal Ammary-Risch, MPH Behavioral and Community Health Science, University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, 2003 says

Be open to all opportunities that may come your way, and especially be proactive about searching for opportunities that can enhance your educational development such as internships, assistantships, or participating in professional meetings and conferences. I’d also recommend doing informational interviews with people working in the field that you are interested in to see how they got where they are. Lastly, remember that public health is full of interesting and challenging topics, so always be open-minded about tackling new topics or subjects that you might not have ever thought you’d be interested in. You never know where you’ll find your niche.

When researching schools of public health, ask admissions staff where their graduates go on to work. The University of Minnesota School of Public Health shares a survey of its graduates online (http://webprep02.ahc.umn.edu/sphgrads/results.cfm). Be sure to also check out schools’ career services websites—or, if you’re visiting campus, the career services office—for resources for the sorts of opportunities you’re interested in.

Most executive public health positions prefer, if not require, an advanced degree in public health or related degree and or at least ten years of relevant experience. Here are a few sample job postings for management positions at a nonprofit, a government agency, and a for-profit found on the web. A public health graduate degree would help prepare you for the following responsibilities and duties (italics added for emphasis):

### Senior Infectious Disease Advisor, Global Health Fellows Program

**Two-year government fellowship (www.ghfp.net/recruitment/)**

The Global Health Fellows Program (GHFP) is a five year cooperative agreement implemented and managed by the Public Health Institute (PHI) in partnership with the Harvard School of Public Health, Management Systems International, and Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. GHFP is supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The goal of GHFP is to improve the effectiveness of USAID Population, Health and Nutrition programs by developing and increasing capacity of health professionals in Washington, DC and overseas. This is accomplished through the recruitment, placement and support of junior, mid and senior level health professionals; a diversity initiative focused on providing internship and mentoring opportunities in international public health to under-represented communities; and professional and organizational development activities to bolster USAID’s ability to maximize results and strengthen its leadership role in global health.

**Roles and responsibilities:**

The Senior Infectious Disease Advisor will provide technical leadership to expand and strengthen the quality of ID services in Ethiopia, with a particular emphasis on TB. The Advisor’s primary areas of responsibility include providing strategic and technical leadership and direction on ID issues to USAID/Ethiopia. S/he will also work closely with the USAID HIV/AIDS team to ensure TB and TB/HIV programs are coordinated. Specifically, the Advisor will:

- Serve as the primary USAID technical advisor on ID issues, with a particular emphasis on TB, working closely with other USAID staff and partners
- Analyze trends and gaps in ID issues
- Review and/or help prepare strategies and program plans
- Provide technical assistance to ensure program investments are consistent with international norms and standards and are synergistic with other investments made by the United States Government and partnering agencies
- Meet regularly with USAID partners and other ID and TB stakeholders to discuss issues related to program vision, strategy, design, and development/implementation
• Provide technical support on the program design and implementation of TB guidelines, interventions and community-based programs
• Conduct program evaluations and/or prepare scopes of work for independent evaluations
• Monitor and analyze trends and issues related to TB and TB/HIV including HIV testing of TB individuals, optimizing TB treatment for those dually infected, TB screening of HIV individuals, implementation of preventive therapy, and TB drug resistance levels among HIV-infected individuals
• Keep up-to-date on international recommendations and standards, and provide technical advice to ensure that ID and TB programs are consistent with international standards and recommendations
• Assist with the identification of potential technical partners and implementation mechanisms for future ID and TB programs
• Prepare ID components for USAID annual operational plans, performance reports and other Agency documentation
• Contribute ID technical expertise, with an emphasis on TB, for reviews of Mission documents such as annual reports and operational plans
• Provide technical input on taskers and other requests for information related to ID
• Participate in meetings, workshops and task forces and act as a liaison to other organizations working on ID and TB
• Work with other USAID staff to ensure linkages to other programs
• Strengthen coordination with government, donors and NGOs involved in ID and TB
• Monitor current medical and public health literature, reports, and international guidelines and standards in ID and provide recommendations in developing improved approaches to monitoring and evaluating TB and TB/HIV programs
• Participate in job-related working groups and professional meetings
• Prepare and submit occasional technical papers to professional journals and meetings
• Provide technical assistance on issues related to other infectious disease issues, as needed
• Other duties as assigned

Required skills, knowledge & experience:
• Masters degree in public health (MD preferred) with emphasis on infectious diseases
• Minimum ten years’ experience in public health programs with emphasis on infectious diseases, primarily TB
• At least three years’ experience working on international health care delivery in international or resource poor settings.

Experience in multiple countries in Sub Saharan Africa and Asia preferred
• Demonstrated ability to design and implement ID programs, with a particular emphasis on TB, in developing country settings
• Knowledge of and familiarity with international ID and TB initiatives and organizations and the ability to interact successfully with representatives and high level government officials of international and domestic governmental and nongovernmental agencies, multilateral and bilateral organizations, and host country governments
• Demonstrated ability to analyze and synthesize information, and to develop strategies and programs to address gaps
• Demonstrated experience in monitoring and evaluation of program implementation
• Strong interpersonal skills and the ability to work cross-culturally with diverse teams
• Excellent analytical written and oral communication skills
• Willingness to travel throughout Ethiopia
• Ability to obtain medical clearance to live and work in Ethiopia
• U.S. Citizenship or U.S. Permanent Residency required

Research and Evaluation Coordinator
INTERNATIONAL NONGOVERNMENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH ORGANIZATION
Seeking to hire a full-time Research and Evaluation Coordinator to provide technical coordination and operational support to research projects, and to lead the monitoring and evaluation of such projects. This position will be based in the North America office in New York City. The incumbent will work closely with other staff and technical consultants, donor representatives, and collaborating partners to carry out the responsibilities listed below.

Responsibilities:
• Tracks and maintains up to date information on outreach to and negotiations with donors, international collaborators, ministries of health, and other national partners as research collaborations are developed and executed.
• Tracks and maintains up to date information on progress achieved across research collaborations including research protocol development workshops, development and review of research protocols, completion of required ethical reviews, launch and completion of research activities, and the generation and submission of reports and publications.
• Coordinates effective and ongoing communication and exchange of information between and among organization staff, consultants, and collaborating partners related to research projects undertaken at international and national levels.
• Liaises with and provides key information to other organiza-
Senior Quality Improvement Advisor for Indicators

**International For-Profit Public Health Consultancy**
- Coordinate development of quality-of-care indicators for HIV, possibly malaria, and TB
- Liaise with USAID, OGAC, Global Funds, and other stakeholders to develop quality of care indicators for HIV, possibly malaria, and TB
- Develop protocols and tools for data collection
- Design assessment protocols to field test in developing countries the validity, feasibility, and reliability of the quality indicators
- Coordinate the activities of working groups to develop indicators and tools
- Coordinate activities of field-based teams to test indicators
- Write technical reports and present results to international groups
- Assist Ministries of Health (MOH) to improve management and quality of care
- Participate in business development activities

Qualifications
- Must have demonstrated ability to work effectively with senior experts of international organizations to gain consensus on key indicators
- Must have a track record of being able to produce results in a timely manner and of being a team player with flexibility to adapt to changing work conditions
- A masters degree in public health or the social sciences and over 10 years of experience in health care improvement including the development and testing of quality-of-care measures.
- Excellent analytical, writing, and organizational skills, and excellent interpersonal communication skills
- Experience in research databases
- Advanced skills in MS Word, Excel, and Power Point
- Working ability in English is required; working ability in French or Spanish is also highly preferred
- Occasional overseas travel would be required to developing and transitioning countries

Additional Qualifications:
- Experience in the operating systems of and working with donors, multilateral organizations, foundations, and technical assistance agencies.
- Ability to effectively address multiple complex activities and tasks concurrently and to work under the pressure of deadlines.
- Demonstrated capacity to work independently and as a part of a team.
- Strong skills in organizing resources and establishing work priorities.
- Advanced-level proficiency with Microsoft Office packages.
- Ability to travel internationally if necessary.
- Fluency in written and spoken English is required; additional proficiency in Spanish and/or French may be a strong advantage.

What should you know about admissions?

**Applying**

Each program, whether for a degree or certificate, has its own admissions requirements, which typically include submitting a completed application, statements of intent (personal and/or career goals essay), resume, letters of reference, transcripts, and graduate admissions test scores. It is crucial that you prepare essays and application materials meticulously, proving to the review committees not only that you can follow instructions, but also that you can express your motivations to attend graduate...
school and the connections between this education and future goals. The following information is more specific and common to applying for graduate-level public health programs.

> Read our series of articles offering practical advice on applying to grad school

Most of the CEPH accredited schools of public health use the Schools of Public Health Application Service (SOPHAS), which is a universal online application service at www.sophas.org. SOPHAS allows applicants to streamline and manage their public health graduate admissions process for those schools and programs that participate. The SOPHAS website has a list of schools that use their service.

Whether or not your graduate program of interest is a SOPHAS participant, be sure to follow its admissions process very carefully because each program will have individual requirements.

All degree programs require a graduate admissions test score, usually the GRE or MCAT, although some, such as Boston University School of Public Health (http://sph.bu.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=570&Itemid=728), take the GMAT or other test scores. The University of Washington School of Public Health (http://sph.washington.edu/prospective/edprograms.asp) waives the GRE score if you already have a doctoral degree from an accredited institution in the United States. If you are a student from outside of the United States where English is not the primary language, you will have to take and submit your scores for the TOEFL.

Admission requirements vary across schools and within school departments for the different concentration areas, too. Certain departments want to see particular coursework, even advanced degrees, and others want relevant work experience. Both Yale School of Public Health (http://publichealth.yale.edu) and the University of Arizona Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health (www.publichealth.arizona.edu) require a year of science and a year of math for all applicants, while other schools do not. The University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health Department of Biostatistics (www.publichealth.pitt.edu/interior.php?pageID=99#department_requirements) requires two semesters of calculus, one course in computer programming, six credits of biology, six credits in social sciences, and a professional degree or background in health—while the Department of Behavioral and Community Sciences requires none of those.

Some doctoral-level programs such Boston University School of Public Health require that you have your Masters of Public Health or similarly related degree and at least three years of related work experience when applying. Others will allow you to apply and complete your masters along the way. A few programs, such as the Masters in Public Health Biostatistics concentration (www.biostat.washington.edu/grad/degreereqs/MPH) at the University of Washington School of Public Health, require that you already have or be working towards a doctorate in another field. The Yale School of Public Health offers an Advanced Professional MPH program (http://publichealth.yale.edu/oyp/advprof.html) that also requires that applicants have a doctoral-level degree in a field related to public health.

Additionally, if applying for the Global Health concentration at the University of Washington (http://globalhealth.washington.edu/index.php) you are required to have significant international experience or must concurrently apply for the Masters International program through Peace Corps to fulfill the international experience. That said, “significant work experience with economically disadvantaged communities in a developed country” may substitute for part of the international work experience.

Certificate program admissions may have a different application process and requirements than their degree counterparts. The University of Arizona Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health (www.publichealth.arizona.edu) does not require an admissions score. Applicants to the Boston University School of Public Health International Health certificate program (http://sph.bu.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=477&Itemid=579) in International Health complete a paper application through the Office of External Education instead of submitting an application through SOPHAS. Be sure to check with the programs you are interested in for specific instructions.

> Read our series of articles offering tips on how to prepare for grad school

**Financial aid**

As with any degree, admissions staff recommend that prospective students pursue many avenues of financial aid early in their graduate school research. Some schools may have a list of additional financial resources for their students.

Employers may help support graduate studies, whether through flexible scheduling, tuition reimbursement, or additional re-
Sponsibilities (leading projects, etc.). Universities themselves often offer scholarships and graduate assistantships that help cover the cost of tuition, fees, and expenses.

Ashley Atherton, MPH in Health Promotion and Behavior from The University of Georgia, College of Public Health (www.uga.edu/publichealth/), 2006, says,

I was able to obtain a teaching assistantship during my graduate education experience, so this was beneficial to me both financially (a tuition scholarship and a stipend) and professionally (by being given the opportunity to teach basic health and wellness courses to undergraduate students). I had over 150 students in my courses, so I had to continue to use time management and work/life balance techniques. However, this allowed me to gain professional experience and decrease financial burdens.

You may also consider attending a public health school or program at a public educational institution. State universities also have in-state tuition rates for residents of that state and sometimes for out-of-state students via state reciprocity agreements.

- Read more about state tuition reduction programs here www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/residencytuition.html
- A preliminary list of public health scholarships offered by different universities/organizations can be found at http://scholarships.fatomei.com/public_health.html

Some resources for international students looking for graduate education funding:

- Fulbright Scholar Program www.cies.org
- Resources for International Librarians, Health Professionals and Researchers in Developing Countries www.nlm.nih.gov/psd/ref/international.html
- GrantsNet: Funding opportunities for training in the biological and medical sciences www.grantsnet.org
- International Student Aid www.finaid.org/finaid/focus/intl-stud.html
- NAFSA: Association of International Educators www.nafsa.org
- Council of Graduate Schools www.cgsnet.org
- Foreign Aid www.foreignaid.com/locations_db/
- Ford Foundation International Fellowship Program www.fordfp.net/index.aspx?c=3

Learn more about funding your graduate education www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/financing.html

Read our series of articles offering tips on how to prepare for grad school, including discussions of working while studying www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/preparing.html

Conclusion and further resources

A degree in public health can help prepare you for work on a variety of public health issues and across all sectors. It can also provide you with opportunities to gain experience in and connections within the field.

The breadth of the education and ability for students to pick concentrations makes it extremely versatile. Public health programs bring together professionals who are committed to protecting and enhancing the health of communities, either locally or globally. An alumnus of the University of Georgia College of Public Health (www.uga.edu/publichealth/) Masters of Public Health in Environmental Health Science, 2007, says,

Public health is a very rewarding career field. It provides a great opportunity for improving the health of individuals and communities. There is a wide variety of concentrations that would allow just about anyone who is interested in a health-related career field the outlet they seek.

Public health quick links

These links provide useful further reading on this degree area.

- What is Public Health? www.whatispublichealth.org
- This is Public Health www.thisispublichealth.org
- Pathways to Public Health www.pathwayspublichealth.org
- Association of Schools of Public Health (U.S. and international) www.asph.org
- American Public Health Association www.apha.org
- World Federation of Public Health Associations www.wfpha.org
- European Public Health Association www.eupha.org
- International Association of National Public Health Institutes www.ianphi.org