

# ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE: ENHANCING INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

## EXCELÊNCIA ACADÊMICA E PROFISSIONAL; MELHORIA DAS OPORTUNIDADES DE ESTÁGIO

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### RESUMO

Com base na definição de saúde pública para as populações promulgada pela Organização Mundial de Saúde, as oportunidades para estágios na área de saúde pública emergiram como um dos dez serviços essenciais para desenvolver uma força de trabalho colaborativa e competente. As instituições de ensino superior possuem um papel fundamental na preparação e manutenção de uma estrutura que permite sucesso aos estudantes, possibilitando capacidades por meio de estágios no campo da saúde pública. Os diretores do setor de Educação em Saúde Pública apontam que praticamente todos (95%) dos estagiários relatam que a participação em programas de estágio proporcionou as habilidades necessárias para a efetividade no trabalho. Através do desenvolvimento de programas de estágio robustos, as instituições de ensino superior e os programas de saúde pública estão cumprindo sua missão de educar e reparar uma força de trabalho competente.

**Descritores:** Estágios em Saúde Pública; Instituições Acadêmicas; Programas de Saúde Pública

### ABSTRACT

In building upon the World Health Organization's definition of public health for entire populations, opportunities for public health internships have emerged as one of the ten essential public health services in developing a collaborative and competent workforce. Academic institutions of higher learning play an important role in preparing and maintaining structures for student success, allowing capacity building through public health internships. The Directors of Public Health Education (DPHE) document that nearly all (95%) of internship respondents reported that participation in internship programs provided the necessary skills to be effective on the job. Through the development of strong internship programs, academic institutions of higher learning and public health programs are fulfilling their mission to educate and train a competent workforce.

**Descriptors:** Public health internships; Academic institutions; Public health programs.

# REVISA

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THEORETICAL  
REFLECTION

## BACKGROUND

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines public health as “...all organized measures (whether public or private) to prevent disease, promote health, and prolong life among the population as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Inherent in this definition is the fact that public health seeks to promote the wellbeing of individuals, and as such promotes activities which seek “...to provide conditions in which people can be healthy and focus on entire populations, not on individual patients or diseases. Thus, public health is concerned with the total system and not only the eradication of a particular disease.”<sup>1</sup> Through this definition, the WHO seeks to provide a foundation for member states to provide a safety net designed to address the health needs of their individual populations. Building upon the WHO's definition, public health professionals have developed standards designed to provide a framework for public health practitioners, and in the US, have developed the 10 essential public health services in an effort to produce a competent public health workforce (Table 1).

**Table 1-** Ten Essential Public Health Services

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1. Monitor health status to identify and solve community health problems.
  2. Diagnose and investigate health problems and health hazards in the community.
  3. Inform, educate, and empower people about health issues.
  4. Mobilize community partnerships and action to identify and solve health problems.
  5. Develop policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts.
  6. Enforce laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety.
  7. Link people to needed personal health services and assure the provision of health care when otherwise unavailable.
  8. Assure competent public and personal health care workforce.
  9. Evaluate effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services.
  10. Research for new insights and innovative solutions to health problems.
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**Source:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.<sup>2</sup>

Institutions of higher learning play an important role in preparing a competent workforce and strive to develop curricula designed to prepare an educated and empowered workforce. It is, therefore, not surprising to see courses in the areas of biostatistics, epidemiology, behavioral health, health administration, applied research, and environmental health as the foundation or the core of most public health programs in the US. While these courses have prepared, and will continue to prepare a competent workforce, internships allowing students to obtain practical experience is evolving as a best practices model in the US and in other countries.<sup>3-5</sup>

## RESULTS

### Capacity Building Through Internships

Internships allow students to apply the knowledge obtained in the classroom and obtain practical experience before joining the workforce.<sup>6</sup> This is a key finding given the 2016 report from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) which shows that the majority of employers value problem-solving skills and an ability to work in a team as integral skills for

entry-level professionals.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to academic knowledge obtained in the classroom, public health students are required to develop skills which allow them to successfully plan, implement and evaluate health promotion programs in diverse communities.<sup>8</sup> In an effort to improve student success and to avoid failing their students, academic programs and non-governmental organizations have heeded this advice and sought to develop structures and recommendations designed to improve student success and provide structures through which students can obtain practical experiences.<sup>9</sup>

In 2001, the Directors of Public Health Education (DPHE) released the “2001 Building Capacity for Health Programs in Minority Serving Institutions” (MSIs) report which focused on partnership development, student professional development, as well as recruitment and retention. The DPHE’s flagship strategy in this regard has been the development of a stellar 12-week internship program offered three times a year designed to provide practical work experience to students enrolled in health promotion programs while facilitating partnerships between DPHE and MSIs. Since inception, DPHE has placed over 700 interns in a variety of internship positions within federal, state and local health departments, community-based organizations and other health-related agencies.

The DPHE designed its internship program to complement the academic preparation provided by the MSIs with professional development through the internship offerings. During the internship, the interns respond weekly to learning objectives instituted at the beginning of each internship session. The objectives are parallel to competencies in public health promotion and education. Additionally, the interns receive support related to competencies in understanding the interplay between health outcomes, health equity and social determinants of health.

DPHE’s Internship Program offers a unique internship opportunity for selected students to apply academic skills and problem-solving to real-life work experiences while the public health programs they serve gain vitality and fresh perspectives from future leaders. Table 2 provides a summary of the findings from the quality improvement efforts in this program.

**Table 2-** Findings from the DPHE’s Internship Program

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- 68% of program participants are working in public health or a related field.
  - 43% of program participants work at a federal, state, or local health department.
  - Over half (52%) are addressing social determinants of health, health disparities, and/or health equity.
  - Almost all (95%) reported that participation in the internship program gave them the skills necessary to be effective at their job.
  - Over 76% of respondents reported that the internship program helped them obtain a public health job or get one or more professional jobs.
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Data from NACE suggests that students with an internship experience are more likely to obtain gainful employment upon graduation as opposed to those who did not complete one. Academic institutions are sometimes criticized for their lack of involvement in the lives of the communities they serve. It seems logical to think that a well developed internship program will allow institutions not only to better prepare students for post-graduate employment opportunities, but also to become actively engaged in the diverse communities they serve.<sup>7</sup>

The following recommendations are given for institutions desiring to develop an internship program for their students:

1. Develop clear goals and learning objectives for the internship.
2. Develop good working relationships with community partners who will serve as internship sites and will provide onsite preceptors.
3. Develop a Memorandum of Understanding between the academic institution and the non-governmental organization which will serve as a site.
4. Develop a manual for students which includes information related to expectations, code of conduct, confidentiality statements, and department and university policies.
5. Maintain good and consistent contact with the onsite preceptors throughout the internship.
6. Assist students in the development of their goals and objectives for skills they want to acquire during the internship.
7. Celebrate accomplishments.
8. Evaluate and assess student performance periodically during the internship placement
9. Facilitate professional development and post-internship opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

Student success can be said to include more than a “good grade” in academic coursework and expands into the opportunities available to students in- and outside the classroom.<sup>3,10</sup> Internships have been proven to be high impact activities leading not only to higher graduation rates, but also for preparing students to enter the workforce. By developing strong internship programs, academic institutions and public health programs are fulfilling their mission to educate and train a competent workforce.

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