Public Health

Public health is a broad, multi-disciplinary field which addresses the health needs of communities through education, public policy and research. Public health professionals work in a variety of professional settings – in local, state and federal health departments with issues like food safety, health education, epidemiology, etc.; in universities as researchers; in schools and hospitals on education and resource management issues; in non-profit organizations on policy and advocacy issues; in private industry for pharmaceutical or biomedical companies and health insurance agencies; and more.

There are **five core areas of study** within public health:

- **Behavioral Sciences/Health Education** – the social science-based research, design and use of educational programs to promote health, prevent disease and injury and encourage efficient use of health services.
- **Biostatistics** - the use of statistical measures and other public health training to analyze the effectiveness of public health programs, test new drugs, analyze risk factors, plan interventions, and explain biological phenomena.
- **Environmental Health** – education about, and analysis and prevention of health-care issues, including quality of life, that are determined by interactions with physical, chemical, biological, and social factors in the environment.
- **Epidemiology** - the study of patterns of disease and injury in human populations and the application of science to control health problems and analyze the distribution, determinants, and frequency of disease within populations.
- **Health Services Administration** – analysis of the use, costs, quality, accessibility, delivery, organization, financing, and outcomes of health care services to apply to individuals, health care facilities and populations.

Additional areas of study in public health include emergency medical services/preparedness, international/global health, maternal/child health, nutrition, public health laboratory practice, public health policy, and occupational safety. UC San Diego School of Medicine has recently added a new undergraduate major in Public Health effective Fall 2013. Majoring in public health is not required for graduate degree programs, but can be a great preparation. Visit [http://gph.ucsd.edu](http://gph.ucsd.edu) for more info. For definitions and details about these areas, and information on careers, salaries, employers and more, visit the career section of [www.WhatIsPublicHealth.org](http://www.WhatIsPublicHealth.org).

Most public health degrees are offered at the Master’s and doctorate level. The majority of public health students earn a Master of Public Health (MPH) degree preparing them for employment as a practitioner in a specialty area with policy/decision-making and program development responsibilities. But other Master’s-level degrees in Public Health include the Master of Science in Public Health (MSPH), which is like the MPH but with more emphasis on theory than practice, and the Master of Health Administration (MHA) which prepares students for hospital or other health care facility administration. Some Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs also offer concentrations in health care administration or management. Doctoral degree programs (PhD and DrPH) prepare individuals for teaching public health in universities and for senior-level careers in administration and research.

Graduate study in public health can be done at either **Schools** or **Programs** of public health. **Schools** of public health must offer degrees in the five core areas of public health and must offer doctoral degrees; schools are often larger than programs. **Programs** in public health only need to offer MPH degrees in one of the core areas and are not required to offer doctorates, though many programs offer more than these minimums. For information on accredited schools, consult the Association of Schools of Public Health web site at [www.asph.org](http://www.asph.org). For a list of schools and programs visit the Council on Education for Public Health at [www.ceph.org](http://www.ceph.org).

Explore the education and career sections of the ASPH and CEPH websites for more detailed education and career information. Also visit [www.ExploreHealthCareers.org](http://www.ExploreHealthCareers.org) for current job outlook and salary information and to investigate healthcare administration, environmental health, informatics and other related fields. The public health page on [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu) has additional resources to explore, prepare and apply for these programs.

**GET EXPERIENCE**

Confirm your interest in the field and develop the skills needed to work in the public health field through exposure and experience. Talk with or observe public health professionals that you can find through your network of friends and family, by volunteering in a hospital or other clinical facility, contacting public health schools, or by involvement in a professional association like the American Public Health Association ([www.APHA.org](http://www.APHA.org)) or a pre-health student organization ([getinvolved.ucsd.edu](http://getinvolved.ucsd.edu)). You can find more opportunities for experience at [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu).

Extracurricular activities – internships, volunteering, organizations, jobs, etc. – allow you to develop skills transferrable to your future career like communication, problem-solving, creativity, interpersonal abilities and more. These experiences are also great ways to get to know people to write letters of recommendation. Be sure to keep track of when, where and for how long you participated for your future applications.
PREPARE ACADEMICALLY

There is no required or preferred major for public health preparation. You should study subjects you do well in and enjoy. Programs typically require a minimum GPA of 2.75 or 3.0, but the GPA of admitted students at some schools may be much higher. Do your best. An upward trend in your GPA looks good.

You may need to take certain pre-requisite science and social science classes for admission. Courses in the Healthcare and Social Issues minor may be especially useful and more science coursework may be required for epidemiology programs. Pre-requisites vary, so check with each school for their particular requirements.

APPLY TO SCHOOLS

Application typically occurs in the early fall, one year before you want to start the program. Check with your intended programs for specifics and submit your complete application well before the deadlines – earlier in the cycle is better. Apply when you have the strongest application – consider waiting to apply until after you graduate to confirm your interest in the field, gain more experience, build your GPA and get to know letter writers.

Choose Schools – Most students apply to between five and seven programs. Select schools based on your competitiveness, the degree offered, the curriculum and training facilities, the schools’ reputation with public health professionals, location, cost and job placement history. Find lists of schools at www.asph.org and www.ceph.org.

The Application – For many schools, you will use the Schools of Public Health Application Service (www.SOPHAS.org). SOPHAS compiles your transcripts, essays, letters, experience and test scores together to make the process easier for you and the schools. Schools using this service may also ask for school-specific supplemental applications. Review school websites carefully for particulars. For schools and programs that don’t participate in SOPHAS, apply directly on their websites.

Detailed guides and resources for preparing and completing your applications can be found on the public health page at career.ucsd.edu. Some steps take longer than others to prepare – plan ahead! Applications may include:

- Transcripts – To evaluate your academic record, the schools will require official transcripts from every college and university you’ve attended – even unrelated course-work you took at community colleges in high school. Contact registrars’ offices at your schools for instructions (at UCSD - registrar.ucsd.edu).

- GRE Scores – The Graduate Record Exam tests your verbal, quantitative and writing skills and is offered year-round at computer testing centers. Plan to complete the GRE at least one month before your deadlines to receive your scores in time, but you can take the GRE much earlier to allow time to retake the exam. Find preparation materials and learn more at www.gre.org.

- Letters of Recommendation – Obtain letters from 2-4 professors and professionals who know you well and can comment with detail about your skills, preparation and suitability for a career in public health. Get to know potential writers over time – don’t wait until you’re applying to talk to professors!

- Personal Statement – Your application essay should describe in detail the things you have done – classes, volunteering, internships, jobs, etc. – that have helped you develop the skills, interest and motivation for a public health education and career. Have people you trust read and critique your essay. Prep guides, books with sample essays and an essay critique service are available in the Career Services Center (CSC).

- Experience – Applications will ask you to list and describe your extracurricular involvements. Give detailed accounts of your activities. They only know what you tell them, so show how you’ve used your time and developed transferrable skills. Include all activities – not just public health-related ones.

- Interviews – Interviews are your chance to demonstrate your communication and people skills, passion for public health and interest in that school. It is also an opportunity for you to investigate the program and see if it meets your expectations. Prepare and practice with CSC workshops and online resources.

Financial Aid – studying public health is a significant investment of time and money. The financial aid offices at the public health schools and programs are your primary source for information about paying for school – ask about loans, grants and scholarships they might provide. Consult ASPH and CEPH for scholarships and financial aid information. And see the Financial Aid & Fellowships section of career.ucsd.edu for guidance and links to loan and scholarship opportunities.

The Career Services Center offers written guides, web resources, workshops and books on preparing and applying for health professional school. The Health Professional School Fair in Spring Quarter brings representatives from public health programs to campus to meet with interested students. Visit career.ucsd.edu or come into the Center for details and further assistance. Advisors are available by appointment to discuss individual concerns.

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