

Public Health Students' Ability to Interpret and Apply Research Findings

Public Health MPH – College of Health and Human Development

Step 1: Student Learning Outcome

Interpret and apply research findings to inform public health practice, policy, and/or research.

Step 2: Methods and Measures

Direct: A research paper in the program's final course, PUBH 540, assesses for students' ability to interpret and apply research findings to inform a pressing public health issue of their choice. Instructors provide the assessment committee with de-identified student papers, scored via rubric on a three-point scale (1 = Excellent, 2 = Good, 3 = Needs Improvement) wherein the instructors serve as "Rater 1" and assessment committee members serve as "Rater 2". Rubric calibration protocols are implemented, with adjustments made as necessary, to ensure inter-rater reliability. The average score between Rater 1 (the instructor) and Rater 2 (the committee member) are calculated for each participant.

Indirect: All MPH students complete an exit survey shortly before graduation. Students are asked to rate their ability to "Interpret and apply research findings to inform public health practice, policy, and/or research" on a five-point scale; (1) Very Strong, (2) Strong, (3), Adequate, (4) Weak, (5) Very Weak.

Step 3: Criteria for Success

Direct: 85% of students must achieve a score of "good" or "excellent".

Indirect: 85% of students must achieve a score of "strong" or "very strong".

Step 4: Results

Direct: Assignments were graded for all students (n = 23) who completed PUBH 540 in spring 2021. Results indicated that 91% of students (n = 21) scored in the "Good" range, with 9% (n=2) in the "Needs Improvement" range.

Indirect: Graduating students (n = 16) completed the exit survey in spring of 2021, with 81% self-reporting their ability to "Interpret and apply research findings to inform public health practice, policy, and/or research" as "strong" (50%) or "very strong (31%)".

Although the overall targets for success were met, the program identified areas of weakness and noted that from a research standpoint, students should have additional opportunities to; 1) learn how to better substantiate their claims with proper evidence, 2) learn how to be more specific in their recommendations, and 3) understand the importance of defining key terms. Moreover, many of the issues identified were due to students' writing. Thus, to improve students' ability to "apply research findings," they must be provided with opportunities to strengthen their writing.

Step 5: Improvement Actions

For the direct measures, achievement of an "excellent" rating required a perfect score, which placed some of the best papers in the category of "good." The program will move toward more precise categorization in the future. To address areas of weakness, Faculty teaching first-year students will emphasize the importance of defining key terms and substantiating claims with proper evidence. Instructors teaching courses later in the curriculum (i.e., PUBH 524 and PUBH 540) will address students' need to be more specific in their recommendations. Faculty will also devote time in the spring departmental retreat to identify and plan opportunities for improving students' writing. Improvements may include additional course assignments and/or completion of specific writing modules. In addition, faculty will be encouraged to complete Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) trainings through the FDC.