

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Evaluation and Support Mechanisms of an Emerging University-wide Global Health Training Program



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Abstract

BACKGROUND Global health education is in high demand in the United States, across the continuum of learning, and field experiences are an essential part of this education. However, evaluations of these programs are limited.

OBJECTIVES The aim of this study was to evaluate a field placement program at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore, Maryland, to understand how to better support student training overseas and faculty mentorship.

METHODS We used qualitative and quantitative methods to gather data from program reporting requirements (152 student surveys and 46 experiential narrative essays), followed by 17 semistructured interviews, and 2 focus groups. Data were analyzed through manual coding and a socioecological model served as an analytical and a synthesizing framework.

FINDINGS A series of factors influence the participants' experience in overseas placements spanning across 4 aggregate levels, from individual to societal, including opportunity for professional advancement, independence, loneliness and illness, mentorship quality, funding, institutional partnership building, opportunity for public health contribution, and for development of cultural competency. Faculty and students thought that the program was beneficial to the learning experience, particularly for its contribution to experiential knowledge of a low- and middle-income country setting and for developing cross-cultural relationships. Communication and scope of work were 2 areas in which students and faculty members often had different expectations and many students emerged having cultivated different skills than they or their mentor initially expected. Students found the experience useful for both their academic and professional careers and faculty members saw mentorship, one of their professional responsibilities, emerge.

CONCLUSIONS Many socioecological factors influence an overseas field experience, which in turn produces important effects on students' career choices, and faculty members appreciate the opportunity to serve as mentors. The most vital support mechanisms suggested for faculty and students included available funding, clear preparation, and communication facilitation across the experiential continuum.

KEY WORDS collaboration, communication, education, evaluation, global health, health, partnerships, public health, qualitative, training

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This study was funded by the Johns Hopkins Center for Global Health. All authors had access to the data and a roll in writing the manuscript. The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past 2 decades, student demand for academic programs in global health has increased drastically. Approximately 250 North American universities now have global health education offerings, ranging from undergraduate curricula to doctoral programs.¹ A survey of university global health programs found that although 81% of respondents reported a significant proportion of their global health activities focus on education, training, and mentoring, far fewer focus on student travel opportunities.²

Field education is essential to comprehensive global health training: overseas placements provide students with the opportunity to integrate their classroom knowledge with applicable skills in a global health setting. Programs that offer overseas placements have been found to improve students' cultural competency ("the ability of individuals to establish effective interpersonal and working relationships that supersede cultural differences"³) and personal and professional growth.^{2,4-9} A systematic literature review on the influence of medical international health electives showed participants were more likely to report attitudinal changes and seek employment in low-income clinics, pursue graduate education in public health, or both.¹⁰ Furthermore, students who studied abroad were more likely to become globally engaged citizens, defined as a combination of global leadership, global values, philanthropic donations, volunteerism, and domestic and international civil engagement.¹¹

In preparation of this work, we surveyed a number of universities with established global health training programs that include overseas field education. Of the 10 global health programs we surveyed, excluding ours, 8 facilitated student travel overseas for original student research, student teams collaborating on a field experience, and students joining an established faculty member project. Programs vary in scale and scope depending on the university, department, center, and institute. Duration varies, between 1 and 6 months, and funding between \$800 and \$5000 depending on the length and location of the project. Although some programs support only 1 individual student, others support between 10 and 75 per year. The smaller programs often specify the region or theme students must operate within. The larger programs frequent more than 90 different countries, the majority of which are low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Upon return, different programs require

students complete a combination of presentations, posters, narratives, and surveys. Although programs have arisen to fill the demand for academic global health programs, they have not been formally evaluated, and limited research has been conducted on how to support and manage these experiences to the mutual benefit of students, faculty, and global south partners.

This study was designed to evaluate student and faculty perceptions on the Johns Hopkins University Center for Global Health (CGH) field placement program on how to better support student training in overseas settings.

METHODS

The Johns Hopkins University CGH was founded in 2006 to address the increasing demand for global health opportunities among students and faculty across disciplines. Initially, student travel and practice experience in LMICs was limited, funding only 12 students. Over time, student and faculty interest in field placement programs has grown significantly. Currently, the Global Health Established Field Placements (GHEFP) provides \$3500 travel grants to students to work with faculty members on their research or practice projects overseas, as a means to work with global health mentors and attain international cross-cultural field experience. Students use this grant for master's practicums, dissertation development, and work experience. The program requires students remain at their placement for no less than 6 weeks, although more than half remain overseas for longer than 10 weeks and many do so for 16 to 26 weeks. In the past 3 years, this program has sent 186 students to field placements. The sampling frame included 54 faculty mentors and 186 undergraduate and graduate students from the Johns Hopkins University Schools of Arts and Sciences, Medicine, Nursing, and Public Health who had participated in the GHEFP from 2011 to 2013.

Conceptual Framework. This research was designed to assess global health experiential learning from more than just the individual level; the aim was to address more distal, macro-scale factors that may influence social outcomes in populations.¹² A socioecological (SE) model serves as the conceptual framework to analyze perceptions of the GHEFP program at Johns Hopkins. SE theory underscores the interdependence of the individual and his or her sociophysical environment.^{13,14} It integrates multiple levels of influence across

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