

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

A New Master's Degree in Global Health: Reflections on a 5-year Experience



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Abstract

BACKGROUND The University of California—San Francisco's (UCSF) Master of Science (MS) degree in global health sciences, a 1-year degree program started in 2008, is the first accredited master's degree in global health in the country.

OBJECTIVE The aim of this study was to review the genesis and structure of the MS degree program, and describe its progress over its first 5 years.

METHODS We reviewed the program's teaching methods, academic curriculum, course evaluations, and backgrounds and outcomes of the first 127 graduates. Student opinions were gathered from anonymous course evaluations. Student outcome data and graduates' perspectives were gathered through a voluntary, anonymous, online survey. We reflect on student demand, program strengths and weaknesses, and future academic directions.

FINDINGS The program's structure arose from three learning objectives identified by the Curriculum Committee: a multidisciplinary approach to the foundations of global health, an emphasis on research design and methods, and an application of theory to international fieldwork. The resulting broad curriculum has attracted students of diverse backgrounds, which has enriched classroom discussions. Over the first 5 years, the program revised its fieldwork project criteria to allow more flexibility in design, leading to a higher rate of publication and enabling students to graduate with an academic portfolio. Students have reported that the high faculty-to-student ratio has fostered strong mentorship relationships; this is vital as 66% of graduates work in academics. Graduates have reflected that group work in the program appropriately prepared them for their work environment. The program's experience has guided its response to: pressure to focus on medical aspects of global health; students' needs for career skill-building; financial challenges; and trends toward online didactics.

CONCLUSIONS The recent surge in interest in global health careers has created demand for academic programs. UCSF has designed the MS degree program to balance breadth and depth of learning in a multidisciplinary curriculum, and combine career preparation and theoretical learning in a one-year academic degree. The challenges of balancing breadth and depth of learning in a multidisciplinary program, and combining career preparation and theoretical learning in a one-year academic degree, have informed UCSF's MS program design.

KEY WORDS education, masters, MS, degree, students, fieldwork, research

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, faculty and trainees at universities in the United States and abroad have exhibited a rapidly growing interest in global health as an independent academic pursuit.^{1,2} The Consortium of Universities in Global Health (CUGH), established in 2008 with 20 members, now has >120 members globally, and a number of prominent US institutions have begun formal undergraduate and graduate programs in global health (eg, Duke, Notre Dame, Harvard).³ In 2013, the CUGH Global Health Programs Database catalogued 4 undergraduate degrees (BA, BS, minor); 20 undergraduate concentrations, tracks, specializations, or equivalent; 11 graduate academic degrees (MA, MS, MSc, PhD), 6 graduate academic concentrations; and 22 professional degree concentrations (MD, NP, residency, MPH, LLM, MBBS).³

This surging academic interest has created demand for improved program collaboration and oversight, including a consensus framework for global health education at the master's level.⁴⁻⁷ In November 2011, the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health Global Health Competency Development Project published core competencies, comprising knowledge, skills, and attitudes that serve as educational benchmarks for careers in global health.^{8,9}

The University of California San Francisco (UCSF) established Global Health Sciences (GHS) in July 2003 as an umbrella organization to harmonize campus programs relevant to global health. With the chancellor's support, representatives of the 4 UCSF professional schools and the Graduate Division formed a Global Health Graduate Group to craft and govern a master's (MS) degree program. In 2008, the MS in global health sciences admitted its inaugural class of 7.

As the first MS degree in global health in the country, the GHS MS was conceived as an academic program with a comprehensive core curriculum and a multidisciplinary approach to public health in a globalized world, with particular emphasis on low-income, marginalized, and underserved populations. UCSF review bodies approved a 1-year, 4-quarter MS degree comprising at least 36 course units and a capstone work product.¹⁰

In this study, we review the genesis, structure, and progress of the degree program over its first 5 years: 2008 to 2013. We summarize the teaching methods, academic curriculum, course evaluation, and student backgrounds. We discuss the program's evolving student demand, strengths and weaknesses, future

academic direction, and career outcomes for its 127 graduates during this 5 year period. We also focus on the evolving student demand, future academic directions of the program, an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, and career outcomes of the 127 graduates during this 5-year period.

DEGREE PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLUTION

Curriculum Development and Requirements. In 2007, in conjunction with the director of the GHS MS, curriculum committee of representatives from the 4 UCSF schools (Medicine, Pharmacy, Dentistry, and Nursing) and the Graduate Division, defined the main objectives, learning competencies and requirements of the degree. The committee agreed that the curriculum should emphasize 3 essential themes:

1. Mastery of the multidisciplinary foundations of global health (social, economic, policy, environment, and health systems);
2. Quantitative and qualitative research methods; and
3. An experiential capstone project that would fully occupy one academic quarter.

The university governance approved the degree in April 2008.

As a University of California Health Science campus, new UCSF degree programs and curricula must undergo an extensive review and sequential approval by the Graduate Council, Academic Senate, and the Campus-wide Coordinating Committee of Graduate Academic Affairs. Further, the Western Association of Accredited Schools must periodically review and certify established academic programs.

Recruitment and Admission of Students. The majority of students learn of the program via the UCSF GHS master's degree website or by word of mouth. Applications are received online and eligible candidates are interviewed in person or by Skype. We examine academic transcripts, letters of recommendation, a resume, and personal statement for evidence of academic accomplishment, global health experience, motivation, leadership potential, and program "fit."

One of the strengths of the program is the wide range of student origins, interests, and experience. The learning environment is greatly enlivened by student diversity, and students are encouraged to share their personal experiences in a supportive and non-threatening atmosphere. Thus, for each class, the Admissions Committee is attentive to the overall

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