

► **DirecTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR

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## Canards and Accreditation

**Y**oung academics are impressionable and I was no different. As I conversed with senior professors from the University of Michigan and University of Utah, I was puzzled by their collective animus toward accrediting bodies. The acronyms flew fast and furious as these leading researchers bristled with contempt for the considerable effort required to achieve and maintain accreditation status. Their enemy lists were extensive as they disparaged accrediting bodies that included the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH), Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME), National Environmental Health Science & Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC), and Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC).

I experience goose flesh upon reflection on my 18 years in academia as I rose from assistant professor to dean of a nationally-accredited school of public health (SPH). The journey was rewarding and I'm overwhelmed each time I encounter my students working in environmental and public health. They seem to be doing well because of, or more likely despite, my classroom prowess. I digress, however.

The ecological dominant in this accreditation conversation is CEPH, arguably the most important accrediting body for public health education in the world. Established in 1974 and located in Silver Spring, Maryland, CEPH is formally recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, governed by a 10-member board, and supported by 10 staff. They

*Let's be steely eyed—academia is a business.*

dispatch their stable of 100 trained academic and practitioner site visitors to public health educational institutions to assess conformance to established standards.

A dramatic increase in the number of CEPH-accredited schools and programs has occurred over the last 20 years. When I joined Loma Linda University as an assistant professor in 1992, there were 28 CEPH-accredited SPHs, fewer than 60 CEPH-accredited programs, and no CEPH-accredited baccalaureate programs. Today, over 200 schools and programs are accredited: 67 schools, 122 programs, and 15 stand-alone baccalaureate programs. Of the accredited institutions, six are outside the U.S.: Canada, Grenada, Israel, Lebanon, Mexico, and Taiwan. In full disclosure, I am a CEPH site visitor and have participated in or chaired site assessments throughout the U.S. and at two universities abroad.

Why is CEPH relevant to us? In 2016, CEPH published revised accreditation criteria that sent ripples across the education landscape. First, among other things, CEPH explicitly reminded SPHs that master of public health (MPH) students, regardless of major, were not necessarily required to complete a stand-alone course in environmental health, though most SPHs historically had

offered one. Second, SPHs would no longer be required to offer students a major in environmental health. Third, accredited institutions would no longer be required to have full-time environmental health faculty and maintain an environmental health department. Environmental health professionals in my sphere went ballistic when they discovered the changes. While the expressed aim of these amendments was to provide the individual academic institutions an opportunity to meet the educational needs of their local constituency, our network viewed the changes as a frontal assault on the profession. Now then, let's unpack the changes.

The 2016 CEPH criteria require MPH students to demonstrate mastery in foundational knowledge in public health. There are 12 learning objectives—six of those are related to environmental health such as “explain effects of environmental factors on a population's health.” Additionally, there are 22 foundational competencies that MPH students must master. Examples include leadership, negotiation, and communication, among others. Finally, concentration specific competencies relevant to the student's declared major must also be attained and demonstrated.

What issues drove these changes? The answer is complex. First, small environmental health enrollments, reduced tuition waivers sponsored by the federal government, and fewer research dollars are likely major contributing factors. Let's be steely eyed—academia is a business. Secondly, we did not help ourselves. The perception that environ-

*continued on page 69*

## DirectTalk

continued from page 70

mental health professors are solo players is widely embraced, exacerbated by narrow tenure requirements. I've observed it myself. Our laboratories, our curriculum, and our nomenclature are foreign to many in the public health enterprise and administrations. I believe CEPH correctly perceived us as self-absorbed and the drive toward an integrated curriculum was seen as a solution to nudging us back to the table. You can disagree with me if you want. I believe, however, that we are partially responsible for the 2016 CEPH accreditation modifications.

What has been the net effect? Has environmental health been deemphasized in CEPH-accredited institutions? Let's review the data. Of the 67 CEPH-accredited schools, four have dropped an environmental health major primarily due to low enrollments. Painfully, one of the first to do so was my prior employer, Loma Linda University School of Public Health. A total of 24 new environmental health degrees have been added and two degrees have been modified to reflect a more global health orientation.

Is the glass half empty or half full? As we see, there are opportunities to embed environmental health throughout the life trajectory of a public health student that were largely absent prior to 2016. Many public



*Mollie Mulvanity, deputy director of the Council on Education for Public Health, addresses the audience at our 2019 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition in July in Nashville, Tennessee. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.*

health academic institutions have in the meantime expanded their environmental health offerings.

I encourage our friends and partners at the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs and EHAC to seize the moment. If CEPH has taken its eye off the

prize and we perceive a strategic opening, let's dive in and provide educational leadership. I believe there are abundant career opportunities in environmental health writ large and while I lack the empirical data to support this notion, I see career opportunities across the U.S. and its territories.

Before I close, I'd like to give the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH) a shout-out. ASPPH's Chief Executive Officer Dr. Laura Magaña, Chief Academic Officer Rita Kelliher, and Chief Finance and Operations Officer Allison Foster have been generous with us. They have inserted us in national educational conversations, provided us visible leadership opportunities, and been generous with their office space in Washington, DC. We are grateful and look to build upon that relationship with them and their network in the years ahead.

The 2016 CEPH criteria is a *bête noire* for many of us. I encourage you to explore and reflect on the changes and familiarize yourself with your local school or program's curriculum. Better yet, secure a seat on your SPH's community advisory board. If you care about this matter then it is time to dress up, show up, and speak up. 🐘

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