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The Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs Takes Action

Editor's Note: In an effort to promote the growth of the environmental health profession and the academic programs that fuel that growth, the National Environmental Health Association has teamed up with the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs (AEHAP) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. The mission of AEHAP is to support environmental health education to ensure the optimal health of people and the environment. The organization works hand in hand with the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) to accredit, market, and promote EHAC-accredited environmental health degree programs.

This column provides AEHAP with the opportunity to share current trends within undergraduate and graduate environmental health programs, as well as efforts to further the environmental health field and its available resources and information.

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The last year has taken the world by storm and put a spotlight on the need for competent environmental health and public health professionals. Environmental health professionals across the nation and the world were and continue to be on the front lines fighting the pandemic and helping us get to the point we are today. Without their knowledge, training, and expertise, things would have likely turned out much worse with even more lives lost and a grim outlook for the future. It doesn't take a pandemic, however, for us in the environmental health field to know and realize the importance of environmental health. The Association of

Environmental Health Academic Programs (AEHAP) was founded in 1999 to address a severe environmental health workforce shortage by promoting and supporting environmental health science degree programs accredited by the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC). With the pandemic highlighting an even greater need, the AEHAP Board of Directors (BOD) decided it was time to take action.

Program Outreach

A roundtable discussion was hosted during the 2020 AEHAP Annual Meeting, giv-

ing environmental health program directors across the nation an opportunity to discuss the challenges and needs with their respective academic programs. While the discussion was enlightening and informative, it left a lot of questions on how AEHAP can help support these programs during this difficult time. The AEHAP BOD quickly developed a program outreach initiative in which each board member was responsible for personally reaching out to an assigned number of program directors to have in-depth conversations regarding the needs of their respective programs.

As the outreach efforts began, immediately there were some common themes that began to appear among all programs. Recruitment and student engagement was among the top need expressed by program directors. Higher education has taken significant financial hits in recent years requiring many environmental health programs to operate with fewer resources, which leaves little time, energy, and effort for recruitment.

The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated the recruitment shortfalls by taking away many of the traditional recruitment methods. Many academic programs were left scrambling to fill in the gaps and recruitment often took a backseat to the sudden shift to online learning that was necessary last year. Several program directors noted challenges with engaging students in the online learning environment as it did not always allow for the hands-on instruction that is characteristic in environmental health programs. Instead of focusing on new student recruitment, programs

reported focusing on retention of current students who faced a myriad of challenges, including health and safety concerns, work and family responsibilities, and a preference for in-person instruction.

As higher education returns to normal operations and concerns of student engagement begin to alleviate, environmental health programs can begin to redirect efforts toward recruitment and engage students with in-person, hands-on education to help prepare them for environmental health practice. The AEHAP BOD understands the importance of recruitment and is committed to developing new, innovative, and effective recruitment materials to distribute to our programs this upcoming academic year. These materials will not only introduce the environmental health field and its career possibilities but also spark a passion for the profession and help students to visualize the contributions they can make as the next generation of environmental health professionals.

National Student Environmental Health Association

The National Student Environmental Health Association (SEHA) was developed by AEHAP during the 2019–2020 academic year. The purpose of the organization is to bring together people knowledgeable in and zealous for environmental health to promote the advancement of the science and practice. The organization also brings together members of the faculty and student body on a basis of mutual interest, understanding, and helpfulness. Student organizations have a longstanding history in higher education and have proven over the years to provide valuable leadership, networking, and service opportunities to students (Rosch & Collins, 2017). Student organizations can serve as a valuable tool for student engagement leading to student retention and higher graduation rates, overall academic and career success, greater leadership capacity, and even increased cognitive and social development (Mayhew et al, 2016; Reese, 2003). The AEHAP BOD understands the positive impact student organizations can have on academic programs and was committed to this initiative.

SEHA was officially rolled out during spring 2020 just ahead of the COVID-19

pandemic. While we had high hopes for a strong start to SEHA, the pandemic rightfully took center stage and we were able to add only a couple of chapters to our national student organization. After a few outreach efforts and information sessions, SEHA has been receiving some interest and we hope to add several more chapters to the organization with this next academic year. We are excited for the future of SEHA and hope this national student organization will play an important role in engaging the next generation of environmental health professionals early on and provide them with valuable leadership and networking opportunities.

First Annual Student Symposium

On May 11, 2021, AEHAP hosted its 1st Annual AEHAP Environmental Health Student Symposium. The symposium brought together students and faculty from all over the country in a virtual format to showcase the research of the 2021 winners of the Student Research Competition and NSF International Internship. We were also fortunate to have a special keynote address from NEHA Executive Director Dr. David Dyjack. The event was a success and is something we plan to continue each year as it is an excellent platform to bring together students, faculty, and environmental health professionals to share ideas and showcase some of the impressive student research projects.

Future Plans

AEHAP, in concert with the American Academy of Sanitarians and EHAC, has been working to develop a certificate program to recognize the achievements and competencies of students graduating from accredited programs of environmental health. With the recent introduction of the Environmental Health Workforce Act (H.R. 2661) by Representative Brenda Lawrence (D-Michigan), we feel it is imperative to help support this initiative by providing our programs with valuable resources to ensure they are able to provide quality education and training for future environmental health professionals.

Since the Great Recession in 2008, more than 50,000 state and local environmental health workforce jobs have been lost (Robin & Leep, 2017) and approximately 50% of the environmental health workforce will be eligible to retire by 2023 (Bogaert

et al, 2019). Now, more than ever, the field of environmental health needs action. We need a more robust and diverse workforce and we will only achieve that by investing in our accredited environmental health academic programs. AEHAP is committed to continuing these efforts, but we will not be able to do it alone. It will take the collective efforts of all of us in environmental health to support our academic programs to recruit and retain the next generation of environmental health professionals. Our future depends on it. 🐼

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