

SPHTM rethinks the DrPH

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Tulane Public Health now offers a Doctor of Public Health in Leadership, Equity, and Advocacy

For many students, a PhD, or Doctor of Philosophy, degree is the right choice for their career goals. The PhD often positions the student for a career in research with an academic faculty position at a university.

Other students, however, envision a more hands-on, less academic career path. In public health, those students are often well served by the DrPH, or Doctor of Public Health.

Although the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine has offered the DrPH for a number of years, resident within the Department of Social, Behavioral, and Population Sciences and, at one time, the Department of Epidemiology, the school has recently reimagined the Doctor of Public Health degree, making it more accessible than ever and more relevant for public health leaders.

Introducing: the Online DrPH in Leadership, Equity, and Advocacy

Revamping the DrPH was something Dean Thomas LaVeist had considered almost as soon as he became dean in 2018, but it wasn't until [Dr. Susan Cheng](#) was hired as associate dean for public health practice and equity, diversity, and inclusion that he had the right person in the right position to be able to reimagine the degree.

“For many years I have felt that most DrPH programs miss the mark because they are stripped down versions of the PhD,” said LaVeist. “I figured, what is the point of offering a doctorate without all the competencies we require of our PhD students. Considering the need for people who can run agencies, non-profits, and community-based organizations, I felt we should be able to develop something that provides educational opportunities for people interested in working in those environments. So rather than offering a ‘PhD-lite,’ wouldn’t it make more sense to offer a program designed to provide skills to help people who are already public health leaders to be even more effective?”

The DrPH is considered a professional degree, so charging the top school administrator for public health practice was a natural fit. As the dean in charge of the school’s EDI efforts, Cheng was also a good fit to tailor the degree around leadership, equity, and advocacy.

Cheng points to the shifts public health has taken through the years, from an initial focus on infectious disease to an expanding focus on chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and brain-based ailments like dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. Cheng believes we’re at another pivot point in public health. “We’re at a time where, regardless of what we understand about risk factors, regardless of what we’re able

to do with treatments, we're really in an age where there are these huge health inequities based on the social determinants of health. That's where our attention needs to focus now," she says.

As the title suggests, the degree focuses on leadership, equity, and advocacy. The first courses focus on the social determinants of health and how infrastructure and racism play into the care individuals receive and the preventive services they seek. Building on that grounding, coursework provides competencies around advocacy, addressing how, once you've identified a problem, you can advocate for a community.

"Then that final piece ties it together with leadership skills. If someone really wants to do a grassroots effort to improve their communities, there are certain management and leadership skills that are necessary to bring an idea from conception all the way to implementation, and then of course evaluation and sustainability," said Cheng.

"It really is a lifecycle approach to how you take a big idea that you want to implement in your community and bring it all the way to a sustainable, thriving program that really impacts populations and makes a change."

Courses cover qualitative and quantitative research methods, public policy, communication and education, budgeting and financial management, and leadership theory. Advanced coursework is designed so that students build a portfolio of work, with the last three courses combining the Integrated Learning Experience (ILE) and the Applied Practice Experience (APE), which are requirements for accreditation of programs of public health. It's in these last three courses where students will identify a population, organization, or community of interest then do a needs assessment to identify the top three needs of that population based on the data gathered. Students will develop an advocacy map and a strategic plan, with one-, three-, and five-year goals along with an evaluation plan.

The final course in the program covers advanced program planning and grant writing. Students will go through all the steps to prepare and submit a grant proposal, with the hope that as they conclude the program, they'll gain funding and be able to take the next steps to build an organization.

The entire process is very entrepreneurial, says Cheng. “I think that’s what’s needed. It’s what makes us special,” she says of the program. “We’re not here to help you get a job; we’re here for you to realize your aspirations, to provide all the support and tools necessary so you can take your idea, implement it, and hopefully get funded. “

Designed for the Working Professional

For such a practice-based program, it also made sense to offer the degree in an online format that would appeal to working professionals. “It’s been conceived right from the beginning for the working professional,” says Cheng. Students will take one course at a time, each lasting eight weeks, allowing them to fit in two courses per semester. “It allows our students to keep their job, which I think is a really big part of what makes this accessible and feasible for a lot of students,” she adds.

Another factor toward making the degree more accessible is that having a master’s degree is not required for admission to the program. Students who do not already have a Master of Public Health will be required to take the five foundational MPH courses, which will ground them in the master’s level public health competencies and prepare them for the doctoral work.

While the degree is a Doctor of Public Health, it’s designed for and appeals to students from a broad cross section, including but definitely not limited to those in public health. The competencies, says Cheng are broad, and “could be applied to almost any practice setting in almost any field.” Students will be able take the skills taught in the DrPH in Equity, Advocacy, and Leadership and apply them to business, architecture, civil engineering, and more, she says.

And health is a central component of many fields. “A lot of our health care is very integrated into a lot of other systems. It’s hard to talk about education or business, urban planning or the built environment, without having some health outcomes that are related,” she adds.

She sees prospective students as those who care about social justice and positive change in the community. “They’re not individuals who necessarily are just looking for a job. I think they’re looking to make a change. “

Depending on whether students come in with an MPH degree, most will be able to

complete the degree in three to five years, with a seven-year limit for completion for all doctoral degrees at the school. Incoming students for the DrPH must have at least three years of work experience.

The first cohort will begin in Fall 2022 with a required in-person orientation. In the year that they graduate, students will also be invited to attend an optional in-person leadership retreat with guest speakers, roundtables, grant presentations, and lots of opportunity to network with peers, faculty, and program partners.

Applications are open now. Learn more at: <https://sph.tulane.edu/online/drph>