Review of Graduate Global Health Certificate Programs in the United States

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Abstract

This report reviewed and analyzed current available graduate level global health certificate programs throughout the United States and provides implications for building a stronger global health paradigm. These programs were identified by using a Web-based search and by reviewing the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) Web page. The graduate global health certificate programs were then categorized based on if they were distance learning or campus based, open to all disciplines, and made available to students outside the current university. Information found from the Web-based search was validated by contacting the listed contact person from the identified schools by phone or e-mail. Thirty graduate level global health certificate programs were identified through the Web-based search, but only 26 could be validated. This investigation reveals that only a few programs offer online graduate level global health certificate programs open to all students regardless of their discipline and backgrounds.

Keywords

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There is a growing interest in global health worldwide, especially as the world becomes more interconnected, national boundaries become blurred, and countries share common health problems (Kickbusch & Ivanova, 2013). A similar trend has been observed in the United States, where there is an increase in the demand for global health education programs (Crump, Sugarman, & Working Group on Ethics Guidelines for Global Health Training, 2010; Drain et al., 2007; Macfarlane, Jacobs, & Kaaya, 2008; Shah & Wu, 2008). This demand, expectedly, will continue to rise, especially as globalization facilitates distance learning and increases the number of international students seeking high quality online education (Altbach, 2002; Kerry et al., 2011). Although formal face-to-face learning has its merit, globalization and internationalization of online education is also critical to the diffusion of knowledge and sustainable innovations on a large scale, including global health (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Piggott, 2011; Livingstone, 2012; Merson, 2014; UNESCO, 2002).

According to the Consortium of Universities for Global Health (CUGH), global health is "an area for study, research, and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving equity in health for all people worldwide" (Koplan et al., 2009, p. 1995). Global health as a field of study is inter/multidisciplinary and collaborative in its approach and should be open to all students interested in the field. In short, an effective global health system integrates other disciplines into conventional medicine. Fried et al. (2010) pointed out, "Many health problems have a linked aetiology and a common impact, and that innovative solutions can come from all sectors, collaborative relationships become, at a minimum, bidirectional—and optimally, multilateral" (p. 536).

Developing and preparing future leaders for a successful career in the complex field of global health is a major responsibility of academic institutions (Drain et al., 2007; Fried et al., 2010). Many academic institutions in the United States now have a global health curriculum, especially medical and public health schools, but it is unclear how many of them offer distance learning course delivery or are open to all disciplines and students outside of the current student body. The goals of this study are to assess the course delivery of current graduate global health certificate programs in the United States and assess whether these certificate programs are open to all disciplines and students outside of the current study body.

Method

U.S.-based graduate level global health certificate programs were identified by using the Google search engine between May and August 2015. The following keywords were utilized for this search: *certificate global health programs, global health online certificate, global health certification programs, graduate global health certificate program,* and *graduate certificate in global health.* Once the search results appeared, we reviewed the first 30 search page results. In ad-

dition, Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH)–accredited program Web pages were reviewed to identify those that offered a graduate global health certificate. The graduate level global health certificate programs identified were then categorized as distance learning or campus based, open to current students or students outside of the current study body, and open to specific disciplines or open to all disciplines.

A validation process was also conducted in September 2015 to verify the currency of the information obtained. A Web-based search was first conducted to verify the original list of schools listing graduate global health certificate programs. The next step was to contact the listed certificate program contact person from the schools using the official phone number and e-mail address from their Web page. With all phone calls and e-mail inquiries, a brief introduction was given and the following three questions were asked: (1) Is your global health certificate online? (2) Is your global health certificate program open to students outside of the current student body in your university? (3) Is your global health certificate program open to all disciplines? Key program contacts from the universities were given an option to participate in the study and reassured that their identity would be kept anonymous if they chose to participate. Their answers were recorded along with the name of the contact, how many attempts were made to reach them, and the dates and times of the attempts. All phone calls were made during normal business hours and according to the time zone of the universities. A specific message was left when transferred to voicemail and a maximum of three follow-up calls were made on the following normal business hour of the university if no response was obtained from the key contact personnel for the certificate program.

Results

Thirty graduate level global health certificate programs were identified from the Web-based search and CEPH-accredited program Web pages. The geographic distribution of these programs is shown in Figure 1. Of these 30 programs, information for 26 programs was validated from the key program contact person of the university through phone inquiries and via e-mail (response rate = 87%). Most of these individuals were reached by telephone. Key findings from the validated graduate global health certificate programs are shown in Table 1. Overall, it was found that 23% (six of 26) of the graduate global health programs were distance learning, 54% (14 of 26) were open to students outside of the current study body, and 81% (21 of 26) were open to all disciplines. However, only five programs were distance learning and open to students outside of the current study body from all disciplines.

♀ = Marker for Graduate Global Health Certificate Programs

Figure 1. Geographic distribution of graduate global health certificate programs in the United States.

Table 1

Summary of Graduate Level Global Health Certificate Programs in the United States Validated

Category	Total number of programs	Open to students outside of the current student body	Open to all disciplines
Distance Learning	6	5	5
Campus-Based	19	8	15
Distance Learning and Campus-Based (Mix)	1	1	1
Total programs	26	14	21

Discussion

Although there is a relatively high number of global health education programs in the United States, this review shows that few offer a distance learning platform. This contrasts with the high number of people (students and professionals) interested in global health and distance learning education in the

United States (Allen & Seamen, 2013; Chase & Evert, 2011; Khan, Pietroni, & Cravioto, 2010; Shea, 2007). The disparity in the demand and supply of distance learning global health programs compares with other courses offered in U.S. higher education institutions. According to the *2013 Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States* annual report, only approximately 3% of higher education institutions have massive open online courses (Allen & Seamen, 2013).

Although not captured in this survey, a variety of reasons are proposed for the disparity in the availability and demand for distance learning education. In a recent survey of 25 U.S. academic institutions of higher learning, the barriers to adopting distance learning education included a higher time required to prepare a distance learning course compared to the campus-based version, among others. Additionally, difficulty in assessing learning outcomes for distance learning compared with on-campus education may contribute to the low adoption rate of online programs. However, the benefits of distance learning education outweigh the risks. For instance, there is a growing body of evidence that shows that distance learning education, in the long run, is more cost effective than traditional instruction. For example, students taking distance learning courses are likely to incur lower transportation expenses (Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, Lack, & Long, 2012).

Because distance learning courses are generally accessible to a wider student population, the low number of distance learning graduate level global health certificate programs in this study might explain why only about half of the programs are open to external students. Global health issues are transnational. Hence, it is logical that global health education programs be made accessible to the global community, particularly to students from low income countries seeking quality distance learning education and certification in global health or other fields. The collaborative effort of Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to increase global access to distance learning opportunities through the edX project is an example. In its recent survey of course registrants on edX, approximately 21,000 of the registrants on the distance learning platform had IP or mailing addresses from least developed countries (Ho et al., 2014). Relaxing the eligibility criteria for enrollment and distance learning course delivery may also increase the number of students who obtain certification in global health regardless of their field or educational background.

Graduate level global health certificate programs help increase literacy and awareness regarding global health among graduate students and professionals within the community. Sound global health certificate programs and training opportunities provide various benefits including attracting attention to global health disparities, educating a foundation of professionals capable of working in resource-poor settings, strengthening the position of the institu-

tion to recruit the most talented candidates interested in global health experiences, allowing students to learn about health and culture native to their home countries, and appealing to philanthropists or future trainees that contribute to tuition through global health certificate programs (Battat et al., 2010).

Although care was taken to ensure all possible global health programs were identified, primarily relying on a Web-based search was a major limitation of this study. Some graduate global health certificate programs may have been missed if they did not have an established Web page in 2015 or key terms alluding to a Web page with a graduate global health certificate program. Also, although many schools have Web pages, not all schools have a page dedicated for their graduate global health certificate programs. Finally, it is important to note that although most of the findings were validated through the key contact person for the graduate global health certificate programs at each respective school, the information provided regarding the graduate level global health certificate programs only reflects the authors' interpretation of the information provided.

Conclusions

There has been a significant recent growth in global health programs, though not many available in a distance learning format to a wide range of students with various academic backgrounds. A common thread among North American academic global health institutes is teaching and research, addressing disparities in health outcomes and access to health care, and alleviating the disease burdens of populations beyond their national borders. Academic programs have led to the emergence of a new generation of global health leaders, who through their research and education will significantly improve the health of vulnerable populations worldwide. Beyond that, global health programs must become the cradle of multidisciplinary integration in health sciences education and training. Academic institutions have the urgent opportunity to address global health challenges by creating and increasing students' access to distance learning graduate level global health certificate programs that would prepare a global health workforce to face the emerging global health challenges.

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