The changing nature of public health challenges in a globalized world has altered the way public health is taught at most universities across the country, including here at our UAlbany School of Public Health. The increasing frequency and reach of emerging and re-emerging infectious disease outbreaks, the growing global burden of chronic diseases like diabetes, and the accelerating impact of human activities on climate and the environment make it all too clear that as public health educators we need to ensure all our students, starting at the undergraduate level, graduate with a truly global world view.

This new reality was underscored by the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH) “Framing the Future” Task Force. According to the Task Force’s report on the future of public health education, “Sharp distinctions between local and global issues seem increasingly irrelevant when infectious agents can arrive at any airport; carbon emissions on one continent influence agriculture on another; many tobacco, food and beverage companies are global enterprises; and workforce shortages in one country compound health risks elsewhere.” This report also stresses that a global perspective benefits all who work in the field of public health, “even those who stay in local health departments or never leave the United States” and that “global health should be a part of every public health students’ education, beyond a specific three credit course.” (ASPPH Framing the Future 2013).

For all these reasons our School has been working proactively for over ten years to create a number of new global health academic programs, international research collaborations, and experiential learning opportunities. Up until now we have focused these efforts at the graduate level. Given our School’s recent launch of a new bachelor’s degree in public health, we are now enthusiastically extending our efforts to the undergraduate level. Doing so is a priority reflected in the Internationalization goals and initiatives defined by our School in support of the University at Albany’s “Authoring our Success” Strategic Plan for 2018 – 2023.

As a faculty member in the Environmental Health Sciences Department and the Faculty Director of the Undergraduate Program in Public Health, Dr. Erin Bell teaches the required course for Public Health majors and minors, “Global Environmental Issues and Their Effect on Human Health.” The key learning outcomes for this course include learning to describe and evaluate global environmental concerns and their association with human health outcomes. In addition to learning key terminology and discipline specific study designs, students read and discuss in-depth recent literature describing the health impacts of priority exposures related to natural disasters, manufactured chemicals, fossil fuels, climate and emerging environmental concerns. Importantly, students learn to explain the socioeconomic, behavioral and biological factors that influence environmental exposures that impact human health and contribute to health disparities at the local, national and global levels.
According to Dr. Bell, “the need for this course is clear” given that “environmental exposures and the impact on human health are not unique to any specific country, but are influenced by factors such as population, poverty, pollution and adequacy of public health infrastructures such as clean water distribution. Our ability to understand these relationships is key in improving the health of all people.”

Dr. Bell has been pleased with the level of student interest in the course. “Global health involves the most fundamental values of society: social justice and health equity; collaboration and partnerships; capacity building; and ethical reasoning. Our students are passionate about such topics and issues.” Given that addressing global environmental health challenges requires “a collaborative approach across multiple disciplines such as maternal and child health, environmental sciences, epidemiology, biomedical sciences and the social behavior and health policy sciences” she says the “interdisciplinary nature of the course also appeals to students.”

In addition to traditional coursework, undergraduate public health students at the University at Albany have the opportunity to learn from faculty currently working internationally and, for many, to gain valuable experience working on faculty research projects. Further, we offer popular study abroad short courses in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic providing students with the opportunity to experience global health first hand. As the Faculty Director of our growing Undergraduate Program in Public Health, Dr. Bell feels “the introduction of a range of new global health courses and experiential learning and research opportunities will be vital to the School’s efforts to meet enrollment targets and to prepare students for success in a today’s globalized world.”

She is “excited to be working with the Center for International Education and Global Strategy and our Center for Global Health to promote and support the Global Distinction academic milestone program, new semester abroad programs, as well as other new global experiential learning initiatives.” To Dr. Bell this is essential as “our students are increasingly passionate and motivated to contribute positively to promoting better health in communities around the world, and as such we must strive to prepare them with the global perspective they will need to do just this.”

John Justino is the Director of the University at Albany Center for Global Health
Erin Bell is a Professor of Environmental Health Sciences and Director of the Undergraduate Program in Public Health

Reference

ASPPH Framing the Future ask Force - “Public Health Trends and Redesigned Education: Blue Ribbon Public Health Employers’ Advisory Board: Summary of Interviews;” September 2013