



Local and Tribal Health Departments (LTHDs) face increasing financial pressures in difficult economic times.

Student learning experiences in LTHDs have the potential to boost capacity while connecting academia to practice.

A cross sectional survey was used to evaluate teaching experiences and future opportunities for students in public health-related fields.

LTHDs reported mostly positive experiences, but anticipate declines in future learning opportunities for public health students.

## The Future of Public Health-Related Teaching in Wisconsin

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The economic downturn of 2008-2009 put increased financial pressure on programming and staffing efforts in Local and Tribal Health Departments (LTHDs) throughout Wisconsin and nationally. Understanding how these financial constraints affect opportunities for field-based learning experiences is essential for future planning. Learning experiences for public health students in LTHDs serve as a vital link between public health academia and practice and provide real world experience for students. Additionally, the “extra help” provided by students has the potential to boost the capacity of LTHDs and fill gaps left by dwindling resources during difficult economic times. Dr. Susan Zahner of the University of Wisconsin School of Nursing and Dr. Mark Edgar of the Wisconsin Center for Public Health Education and Training collaborated on a multi-state study led by Dr. Scott Frank of Case Reserve Western University investigating a number of questions related to teaching opportunities in LTHDs. The study surveyed local health department leaders to evaluate their opinion on the benefits of and satisfaction with student placements and academic partners. The study also elicited their forecast of the future of these opportunities for students.

A cross-sectional survey was sent to every LTHD in Wisconsin. Sixty-seven of 88 Local Health Departments and 11 Tribal Health Centers responded for an overall response rate of 67%. The majority of respondents were health officers (71.6%) from county health departments (79.7%) in rural jurisdictions (52.2%). The sample was representative of overall state Health Department (HD) demographics with respect to HD type and jurisdiction size; however, city and tribal HDs were slightly underrepresented compared to county HDs.

### LTHD Attitudes Toward Academic Partnerships

Most health departments reported a moderate level of integration with academic programs, with over half of the sample reporting 3-5 academic partnerships. Undergraduate nursing was the most common partnership in LTHDs: 98% of respondents have teaching experiences with undergraduate nursing students. Other common partnerships involved nutrition, graduate nursing, high school, and undergraduate public health students.

The survey asked respondents for their views on the importance of student learning experiences in LTHDs. Eighty-seven percent (87.3%) of the sample indicated that these learning experiences were “very important” for students entering public health-related fields.

In terms of quality, LTHDs expressed high levels of satisfaction with their existing academic partnerships and generally felt that students brought helpful skills and labor to their departments. Table 1 shows satisfaction ratings, overall benefits, and expected decreases in experiences in LTHDs based on program type.

Graduate and undergraduate students in nursing and public health in particular were highly regarded by LTHDs, along with environmental health programs. Despite this positive feedback, respondents estimated teaching programs will be reduced by 10-30% in the future.

**Table 1:**  
LTHD Views on Teaching/ Student Learning Experiences

	Satisfied/Very Satisfied % (N)	Benefit Exceeds Effort % (N)	Expected Decrease % (N)
Graduate Public Health	85.0 (17)	94.4 (17)	15.4 (4)
Undergraduate Public Health	79.0 (15)	88.2 (15)	12.0 (3)
Graduate Nursing	87.0 (20)	90.0 (18)	13.3 (4)
Undergraduate Nursing	81.8 (45)	81.1 (43)	22.2 (12)
Environmental Health	80.0 (16)	83.3 (15)	18.8 (6)
Community College	50.0 (8)	37.6 (6)	16.0 (4)
High School	53.9 (7)	45.5 (5)	30.4 (7)
Other Programs	68.0 (17)	80.0 (20)	10.8 (4)

LTHDs were also asked to rate their satisfaction with academic partnerships in a number of areas (Table 2). Most LTHDs reported a moderately high degree of cohesion between their department and academic institutions, but also expressed concern that academic partners fail to fully grasp the financial limitations and pressures felt by practitioners in LTHDs.

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For more information about the Wisconsin Center for Public Health Education and Training, please visit [www.wicphet.org](http://www.wicphet.org)

**Table 2:**  
LTHD Attitudes Toward Academic Partners

Academic programs we partner with:	Disagree % (N)	Neutral % (N)	Agree % (N)
... are very effective in preparing graduates to become part of the Public Health workforce.	3.6 (2)	30.9 (17)	65.5 (36)
... have an accurate understanding of the demands of Public Health practice in Health Departments.	23.6 (13)	30.9 (17)	45.4 (25)
... have no idea of what is happening in the front lines of Public Health Practice.	56.4 (31)	29.1 (16)	14.5 (8)
... share the same basic values we hold in our Health Department.	0 (0)	25.5 (14)	74.5 (41)
... tend to take unfair advantage of our Health Department.	78.2 (43)	20.0 (11)	1.8 (1)
... have faculty who are as committed to supporting our Health Department as we are to supporting their students.	9.1 (5)	34.5 (19)	56.3 (31)
... have made a positive impact on the way our Health Department functions.	5.5 (3)	43.6 (24)	50.9 (28)
... look down on Health Departments and our workforce.	74.5 (41)	23.6 (13)	1.8 (1)
... don't appreciate the financial pressures our Health Department is experiencing.	38.1 (21)	30.9 (17)	30.9 (17)
... care more about research than really improving community health.	61.2 (33)	33.3 (18)	5.6 (3)

## Conclusions

### LTHDs:

- Frequently engage with public health and nurse training programs.
- Believe that benefits from student teaching experiences exceed the efforts expended by the LTHD.
- State that students contribute valuable skills and increase their capacity in most cases.
- Believe that student experience in LTHDs is very important for students.

### Areas for potential improvement:

- Need to address pending reductions in opportunities for students in LTHDs.
- Need to increase academic appreciation of financial realities faced by LTHDs.