An evaluation of the MPH student experiences and learning in the Community Health Assessment course at San Francisco State University

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Understanding student experience with community health assessment

OVERVIEW

In November 2011, HOPE SF, the San Francisco Department of Public Health, and San Francisco State University’s Department of Health Education and the Health Equity Institute came together in a partnership to further the development of strategies to address health issues facing HOPE SF public housing communities. The partnership’s work seeks to illuminate how the City of San Francisco, private partners and other stakeholders can best support the development and implementation of health strategies in HOPE SF communities. A key aspect of the partnership are community needs assessments, completed by SF State MPH graduate students. Three assessments have been completed and were all designed to result in meaningful products for the community and City partners as well as serve as a practice-based learning opportunity for MPH Students. Students and faculty conduct the assessment activities over a seven month period as part of the Community Assessment for Change and Professional Public Health practice courses in the SFSU MPH program.

The community assessment class and the program’s partnership with the HOPE SF initiative is a unique experience that provides the opportunity for students to put into practice theoretical concepts and engage in professional practice in the field to develop a relevant product. Due to the structure and collaborative nature of this course, an evaluation was done to explore the impact of this large-scale partnership on MPH student’s experience and learning. This evaluation was spearheaded by three former SFSU MPH students who participated in the assessment course. Sarah Wongking, Campus Community Partnership Manager of the HOPE SF Learning Center and MPH graduate, managed this evaluation project and provided support to evaluators Rebecca Chigas and Jessica Tokunaga, both MPH graduate students. Their experiences with the assessment as students, inspired them to conduct an evaluation to understand the experiences of their peers and what they may have learned from the course.

The course instructors, Jessica Wolin, Sarah Wongking, Paul Rueckhaus, and Tope Pedro, as well as the three different cohorts of MPH students who took the assessment course in Spring 2012, 2013, and 2014, played a key role in the planning and implementation of the community assessment course and were instrumental in the planning and completion of this evaluation.

CONTEXT OF EVALUATION

With the goal of improving the health of HOPE SF community residents, the San Francisco State Department of Health Education Masters of Public Health program, SF Department of Public Health and the HOPE SF initiative began a collaboration in 2012. Current Hope SF communities include: Alice Griffith, Hunter’s View, Sunnydale, Potrero Terrace and Annex. Each MPH cohort devoted a Spring and Summer semester to community health assessment and investigated a specific health issue relevant to HOPE SF communities and assessed a specific health issue relevant to HOPE SF communities. In the assessment, students work in teams to conduct a literature review, collect data, analyze data and develop final findings and recommendations shared through a formal presentation.

- In 2012, the first cohort of MPH students investigated the opportunities and barriers to Peer Health Leadership in HOPE SF. The cohort conducted a literature review and interviewed a total of 42 stakeholders, peer health program staff members and residents of HOPE SF communities, which informed a final report.
- In 2013, a new cohort of MPH students examined the opportunities and barriers to mental health and well-being among children and their families living with the HOPE SF communities. After reviewing the literature the students interviewed 81 key stakeholders, mental health program staff and residents of HOPE SF communities, which informed a final report.
- In the most recent assessment, the latest cohort investigated the opportunities and barriers to health and wellbeing of youth ages 12 and 24 living in HOPE SF communities. This third cohort completed their final
report at the end of July 2014 and gained insight from a total of 180 key stakeholders, youth program staff and adult and youth residents of HOPE SF communities.

PURPOSE
The purpose of this evaluation was to understand the impact of the Community Health Assessment for Community Change course and team practice, along with the partnership with HOPE SF, on MPH student’s experience and learning.

This evaluation aimed to answer the following guiding questions:

1) How did the HOPE SF assessment impact students understanding of community partnerships and stakeholder engagement?
2) What impact did the cohort/team practice component of the HOPE SF work have on student learning and experience?
3) What impact did participation in the assessment have on the development of your professional identity in the field of public health?
4) In what ways did the topic of focus, context, environment and population have an impact on student learning?
5) What impact does class management, project coordination and in class instruction have on student learning and the experience?

The findings of this evaluation will help to inform course management and instruction of future assessment and team practice courses. Additionally, these findings can provide guidance to other MPH programs in developing their own assessment courses to include fieldwork and team practice.

METHODS
Three methods were used to collect data from the three different cohorts in this evaluation: focus groups, surveys and a review of reflection assignments submitted throughout student’s time in the assessment course. Students from each cohort completed seven individual written reflections throughout the assessment course that were submitted to the instructor during key points of the course. These reflections captured “real time” data because students wrote about their experiences as they were happening, giving the evaluators unique insight into the experiences of each student relevant to specific events through out the course.

First and second cohort
Because this evaluation was conducted after the completion of both the first and second cohort assessments, email surveys and analysis of student reflections were used. Surveys were sent to the first and second cohorts to gather their retrospective thoughts on their experience in the assessment course. The evaluation team developed survey questions based on the evaluation key questions and were sent out via Qualtrics, an online survey software. The student reflections were pre-reviewed and all identifiers were removed before the evaluators analyzed the reflections.

Third cohort
An initial focus group (January 2014) was conducted with the third cohort to capture student thoughts and impressions before they began the assessment course. A follow up focus group (September 2014) was conducted a month after the completion of the assessment course to gain their reflections of their experience and learning. Student reflections from this cohort were also analyzed.
Understanding student experience with community health assessment

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**FINDINGS**

**Finding 1: Development of Concrete Skills**

The assessment course and experience provide students with a variety of public health professional skills and play an important role in the formation of their professional identity, preparing them for future careers in the field.

A majority of students gained skills applicable public health profession and felt that the class better prepared them for their future careers. Some of the skills that students reported gaining were:

- Writing a literature review
- Literature research skills
- Protocol development
- One-on-one interviewing
- Conducting focus groups
- Analysis and synthesis of data of qualitative data
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- Objectivity in data
- Working with various stakeholders
- Report writing
- Public speaking

Students gained not only concrete public health skills, but a better understanding of the field of public health and how they view themselves as public health professionals. Before students began the assessment course, there was confusion on how to define their professional identity. By the end of the assessment course though, students had more clear ideas about their professional identities, how they can impact the field of public health, and what interests they want to pursue in the future. Many students felt more confident in their abilities to work in the field, and upon completing the assessments students began to apply the skills they learned from the course in their current public health work. It was clear that all students developed skills, while all students reported an impact on their professional identity, the impact varied for each student. Some students reported a better understanding of their interests, or that the experience clarified what they want to do, environments they do or do not want to work in, or sparked interest in new areas of public health.

- “Professionally, I have definitely had a transformation. For instance, my view of public health has broadened, from wanting to be involved only in public health research to being interested in applying to a variety of jobs.”
- “Before this semester I had no idea what an assessment was let alone the steps that go into conducting an assessment. I now know what it means to write a problem statement, do a literature review, develop a protocol, effectively interview someone, and analyze the data gathered.”
- “This process gave me such huge insight into trauma and a peaked interest in studying trauma –informed processes”
- “Lastly, I know that the overall experience of the assessment, including the lit review, data collection and report writing, has solidified a lot of my skills as a public health professional.”
Finding 2: Interest in Health in Public Housing
Participation in the assessment course increases student’s interest in issues related to the health of public housing community members.

Students also gain compassion for residents of public housing and have an increased understanding of the social justice issues faced by community members upon completing the course. A majority of students entered the course with very little understanding, knowledge or professional experience with public housing communities. Across cohorts, students experienced anxiety and nervousness because of their unfamiliarity with the community and issues that exist in HOPE SF and public housing communities. Some students stated that they had very little knowledge of the social justice issues that these communities face daily. Students learned about the history of public housing nationally and specifically in San Francisco through the literature review and learned about the experiences of public housing communities directly from residents and service providers. Through these experiences, students gained more knowledge about inequities and injustices that have impacted these local communities over generations. In some cases, this knowledge change impacted how they viewed these communities and the health issues facing them. After gaining an increased understanding of the community, some students expressed the desire for continued involvement with HOPE SF and interest in working with “urban renewal programs” or with “vulnerable populations” in the future.

- “Spending time with and learning from the youth leaders helped me better understand [this experience and made this sometimes very challenging and stressful experience easier.]”
- “I used to be one of the outsiders who thought that the majority of low-income minorities are angry and feel that something is owed to them. I now see why they are angry and understand the behaviors they use to show their emotions in response… I feel that it is rewarding not only for me, but also for the public housing communities, that I have gained more compassion and am able to see more clearly things from their perspective.”

Finding 3: Impact of Team Practice
Teamwork requirements present challenges for students but enhanced their leadership skills and ability to work with others.

Students gained skills in facilitation and were able to reflect on their strengths as a teammate and what they want to improve on. Hearing their teammates’ ideas and listening to what peers had to share helped expand their own views and lead to more knowledge creation. Working in pairs provided students with a lot of support and many felt they built new friendships and relationships and were motivated by their partner. Most students felt that the teamwork in the course was positive and collaborative and felt it was more helpful to learn in a group than individually.

There were some challenges in working in teams throughout the assessment. A small percentage of students felt that their own personal work was not used enough and did not feel acknowledged by their teammates. These students wished more of their individual contributions were recognized, which caused some friction within teams. Students also found difficulties in finding time to meet as a team because of conflicting schedules and competing priorities. Group dynamics also played a role in impacting how students view their final team product, i.e. if the team worked well together and all members felt acknowledged, students felt more positive about their final products.

- “This experience also brought me much closer to many of my university colleagues. Some of the relationships I am building now will continue for a lifetime of personal and professional support. Building relationships with people was made easier through meaningful work.”
- “I found new ways to work with others, listen, give my feedback and input without feeling intimidated and stand up for what I felt was important and not back down.”
- “I think this course and learning experience exposed me also to the most realistic way products are created in a work setting; however, it was very challenging.”
Finding 4: Learning to work with various stakeholders
The complex and collaborative nature of this assessment increased student’s understanding of the importance of stakeholder engagement in assessment and overall public health work.

Students reported engaging with stakeholders in various ways and that impacted their understanding on what it takes to partner with communities and other agencies. Students reported engaging with stakeholders by contacting stakeholders, getting feedback on assessment tools, interviewing and presenting to stakeholders, and hearing reactions on the final product. All of these interactions had a large impact on student’s learning about the effort and dedication it takes to partner with the community and various agencies. This level of relationship building led to students placing emphasis on accurately reflecting what was said in their interviews, and students felt responsible for ensuring that this information is heard and used for the betterment of the community. Variation in structure of the assessment course impacted students differently in the level of interaction with communities and agencies. Specifically, students in the latest cohort who participated in a CBPR based assessment structure reported an increased understanding of challenges and high rewards of working closely with community members to integrate them as crucial partners in the assessment.

- “Furthermore, this assessment gave me a comprehensive in-depth understanding of the stakeholder engagement and community partnership. Seeing the aspects of the stakeholder engagement and community partnership it became clear to me that having a common goal between partners is vital when trying to create change.”
- “It will definitely impact the work I do in the future, since I now have a better understanding of how the stakeholder engagement and community partnership go hand in hand and that one cannot succeed without the other. By being part of this assessment I saw just how important it is to include the community one is working with in whatever it is they are trying to accomplish.”
- “Whatever work I end up doing in the future I will always remember how important relationships are and strive to make sure they are being made.”

Finding 5: Value of an actionable assessment
Contributing to work that is of significant importance in local and community efforts and is part of an ongoing commitment invokes various emotions for students including heightened stress, pressure and excitement.

Most students stated they were excited that their work could have an impact and they were doing something “real” in the field. Students were told in the beginning of the assessment course that one goal of the course is to produce actionable outcomes that will be read and used by agencies to improve the health of HOPE SF communities, which caused many students to feel both motivated and nervous about creating a useful and impactful final product. A majority of students felt pressure to deliver their best work, and this pressure increased over the semester as they became more invested in the communities and their assessment topic. The accountability that students express and experience impacts their learning and engagement in the beginning of the assessment course. Fears and anxieties came up for students around having a real impact but also about practicing new skills in the field such as interviewing and formal presentations. Students shared a lot of challenges from the real time pressures “learning while doing” at the same time for a larger audience outside of school. The level and scope of work required was stressful for many students, but after their final presentations and products, students felt a high level of reward for their efforts. Students also felt more confident in their skill development and learnings because they were able to practice them in the field instead of just within a classroom context.

By the end of the assessment, many students expressed appreciation for having a long-term collaboration with HOPE SF, and this was particularly apparent in cohort 2015 who had the previous two years of relationship building between SFSU MPH students and HOPE SF communities to build off of. Most students, while unsure of overall HOPE SF initiative impacts and goals, appreciated being a part of a larger partnership with long-term and high-stakes goals and outcomes. Having an ongoing partnership increased the stakes for students and made them feel a strong desire to make their work useful and further relationship development for future cohorts to work with HOPE SF.
• “While I have been involved in assessments in the past in recruiting people or helping to write and edit results, being embedded in the process from beginning to end really provided me invaluable training that I have never been able to get in my work.”
• “I was recently talking to a couple of MPH students at other universities and the first thing I noticed was that none of them got to work on a real time project of this magnitude and that made me feel grateful for the opportunity that I got from SF state.”
• “With the guidance and support of so many people, I observed and first-hand learned what it takes to conduct a health assessment. That in itself was a milestone for professional development—this is something that I never would have imagined learning and I recognize what a valuable tool it is.”
• “Coming to terms with the fact that our analysis of the interviews actually mattered and was crucial to the success of the HOPE SF projects at these four sites was hugely intimidating but also very rewarding.”
• “You can be told how to do something, but unless you actually go out and practice, you are not going to know how to do it.”
• “In the most literal sense of rewarding, perhaps another highlight was seeing that the behind-the-scenes work of Jessica and others had already resulted in action toward meaningfully sustaining implementations of some recommendations. The best example was the funding of youth-to-youth grant making. Another aspect of that was the knowledge that the work of previous partnerships anchored by two previous SFSU MPH cohorts was instrumental in building partnerships, trust and a record of success.”

Finding 6: Impact of context and previous knowledge
The social/political climate accompanied by messages provided to students from staff, instructors and peers before beginning the assessment course impact student’s value, experience and learning throughout the project.

Messages that students hear about the assessment course impacted student’s initial engagement in the course. Students in the first cohort expressed disappointment in experiencing a new class structure that focused on a class-wide assessment on HOPE SF communities. Prior to 2012 students in the assessment course formed small groups that each partnered with a separate organization. As a result, a few students in the 2013 cohort expressed disappointment in the transition to a class-wide assessment focused on HOPE SF communities. This cohort’s assessment resulted in the funding of peer leadership programs. However by the next year, none of the students in the second cohort expressed disappointment. The second cohort expressed more fear and pressure to deliver similar results from the first cohort (the findings and recommendations from the first cohort’s assessment contributed directly to the funding of four new HOPE SF programs).

• “I really didn’t like when the project shifted…to the entire class doing the same thing without any networking opportunities.”
• “I am most apprehensive about my work not being strong enough to help … I know that I will work as hard as I can in this class, but my fear is that I will fail this community somehow.”

Context of the course and choosing of the topic.
Due to the complexities in coordinating such a large assessment with multiple partners, course instructors begin planning the assessment as early as the previous semester in the fall. During this pre-course planning, the topic of the assessment is agreed upon by all the partners involved, which means that the cohort conducting the assessment does not get to choose the topic themselves. Student reactions to the pre-chosen topic varies depending on the type of topic. When the topic was focused on an “issue” such as mental health or youth health, students were more receptive to examining and issue; whereas when the topic was an actual intervention, students were not as excited or receptive. Since there can be more debate over different interventions, students are not automatically convinced that the chosen intervention is the best one to focus the assessment on. Issues like mental health and youth health though are relatively non-debatable and easily accepted as important issues to examine.
“I believe that peer to peer strategies offer a very promising approach to address the social determinants of health in HOPE SF communities, more than they have potential to address the urgent health care needs of community residents.

“I am not really sure what role [peer to peer] strategies will play on improving the health inequities of the HOPE SF communities.”

“I am looking forward to focusing on mental health and trauma issues, because those are topics that I am very passionate about, and of which I am very familiar.”

Social and political climate within San Francisco.
The latest cohort initially expressed apprehension to the partnership with HOPE SF and was skeptical of the overarching goals of HOPE SF and SFSU with these communities. Students enter the assessment course with varying levels of comfort with the partnership with HOPE SF, which are informed from previous cohorts, messages from instructors, social and political climate, and department attitudes, and personal views of public housing. Access to housing and gentrification in the Bay Area are current hot topics and influenced the latest cohort’s opinions of the HOPE SF initiative. While these issues are not new, the increase in news coverage and debates about gentrification in San Francisco in the past year had a larger impact on that particular cohort than the other two. The focus of the SFSU MPH program is on social justice, so a great deal of attention is paid to the impacts of interventions on disenfranchised communities which influences student opinion about their courses and coursework.

“I am critical of . . . the political agenda in cities like San Francisco who seem to really be making an effort to make it a place for the elite, while the rest fend for themselves.”

“Like others in the class, I have had doubts about the viability of HOPE SF as a project aimed at improving conditions for San Francisco’s public housing residents. I have also questioned whether this form of planned gentrification will really work or simply displace residents over the long term.”

Limitations
There are a few limitations to this evaluation. The evaluation team consisted of members of the 2013 and 2014 cohort and their dual roles as evaluators and former students in the Community Health Assessment course could have impacted interpretations of the data. Also, the inability to do any sort of “pre-test” or “pre-course” survey or focus group with the first two cohorts limits the insight of evaluators’ on those students’ pre/post learning in the course. The first reflections though do reveal what students know and do not know about assessment, public housing, etc., so the evaluators do have some understanding into the extent of learning for students in the course. Limited time and resources also played a large role in the design and work plan of the evaluation.

Implications
Benefits of larger collaborations and team work in learning how to do assessments. Working collaboratively with community and with classmates is a different type of relationship development that is important to student learning. Through collaboration with outside organizations as a cohort representing the university, students can have an increased understanding of professional partnerships in the field. Working in student teams and developing products for the public that recognize the entire team rather than the individual is a learning experience for students that reflects the “team” nature of public health work. While this format does not provide individual students with the opportunity to develop personal and close relationships with other professionals or organizations (as a traditional internship or practicum would), an increased understanding of large systems-level partnerships and team dynamics is an extreme benefit to this particular format.

Developing long-term and ongoing partnerships with organizations and initiatives can be mutually beneficial for both students and partners. Partnering with organizations or initiatives, while complex and at times difficult, can yield more impactful and meaningful work and over time all parties can benefit. The community and agencies benefit from having an assessment done on their behalf, while students benefit from learning assessment skills in real life practice. A long-term commitment between community and campus partnership...
can lead to long-term trust, more significant change for the community, and open up opportunities for projects and collaboration in the future.

**While peer conversations are nearly impossible to regulate, all partners involved in the collaboration should work to develop consistent and realistic messages about the experience.** Students’ opinions of the assessment course are largely influenced by comments made by former cohorts and other faculty and staff. Each assessment and each cohort are different, and therefore student experiences will vary naturally. Students complained that they sometimes received unnecessary prepping or warnings about a certain aspect of the course. For example, the second cohort had a very difficult time with the protocol revision process and as a result the third cohort were warned that it was extremely difficult and they may have a hard time. In fact, the majority of the third cohort loved the protocol revision process and thought the warnings were not useful. All discussions about the assessment that happen with past, current and potential students as well as with any involved partners, should be consistent. Partnership leaders should develop a common message to others regarding the scope and vision of this large-scale partnership.

When students do work with a real audience they have a completely different and more impactful learning experience; students are more invested, motivated, and what they learn sticks. Students really value experiences in which they can have an impact on the community, and MPH programs that emphasize social justice should provide opportunities for students to learn while having a meaningful impact on communities nearby. To increase student engagement and interest in MPH programs, assessment or practicum courses should be linked to relevant outcomes in line with social justice in local communities. Engaging students with a project that is relevant, local, and aligning with program mission goals of learning about social justice will deepen their understanding of health and social justice, and what it takes to improve community health. Allowing students to interact with disenfranchised communities will increase their compassion and awareness of these communities and the issues they face.

**On-going evaluation is needed so that the course and experience is shaped to meet the changing needs of MPH student populations.** Ongoing focus groups with upcoming cohorts enrolled in the Community Assessment Course should be supported. Course instructors, or preferably future Teaching Assistants, can continue to hold informal focus groups both in the beginning and end of the course. We believe these discussions are useful in informing course content and gauging students learning and overall experience with the community assessment course. Having students submit reflections throughout the course is another way to collect feedback privately between individual students and course instructors.