

External Review of Sam Houston State University MS Programs in the Department of Population Health

Strengths of the Department:

Faculty

The Department's programs have many strengths which, first and foremost include a dedicated core of eight graduate faculty. Graduate faculty have appropriate degrees (DrPH, PhD) in Public Health, Community Health, Health Promotion and Exercise Science as well as experience in public health, research and teaching. Senior faculty publish an *average* of 2 refereed journal articles per year (this varies from 1 – 4) and most have numerous professional presentations. This is average productivity for faculty in a teaching institution especially given the teaching loads. Six new faculty positions have been approved in the past year in the areas of epidemiology, health law and management which will greatly enhance the program. Cooperation among the faculty appears to be quite good and faculty complement one another's expertise and research interests. New faculty receive support in the form of release time from service in first 6 years. Other support from the PACE teaching center offers an avenue for faculty to enhance teaching effectiveness.

Environment

The environment in which the Department exists is a strength and it is well positioned within the University mission. Health has been identified as one of four capital development areas. The recently developed MS to replace the MA in Health Education is an important step toward meeting University priorities and attracting excellent faculty and graduate students. The program has full support of the newly appointed Dean of Graduate Studies and potential for collaboration with the planned Osteopathic Medicine program. Collaboration with osteopathic medicine would be enhanced if an accredited MPH program is developed. Although the Department has the necessary expertise to develop an accredited MPH, teaching loads are high and more faculty will be needed for growth.

Students

MS students in the Department's programs are largely non-traditional and come to the program with experience in the field. Consequently the graduate student class is strong. Graduate students speak very highly of the instruction but would like to have contact with a greater number of faculty. The group study seminar developed this spring is considered to be a good vehicle by which to begin this interaction. Graduates are obtaining jobs in the field (but no one is formally tracking this). A recently formed Department Graduate Student Council provides an outlet for graduate students to engage with each other, the faculty and alumni.

Research

Current support for research grant writing from ORSP is limited. However, the College is developing a program to identify funding opportunities for faculty and is collecting data on faculty interests and expertise.

Areas Under Development:

Funding

Funding to support graduate research consists largely of small grants (with one exception), even by senior faculty. A more rigorous funding base and more graduate assistantships will be necessary to maintain recruitment of quality students and support graduate research if the program is to grow as anticipated. This will require additional faculty to decrease teaching loads and free faculty time for research and scholarly activity.

Faculty

The base of 4/4 classes is high for 40-40-20 appointment. Although most faculty buy out to 3/3 teaching load, this still leaves little time for research. More robust start-up packages to attract high quality faculty who will participate in research and teaching at the graduate level should be considered. There is currently no mentoring program for non-tenured faculty and yearly progress toward tenure is limited to FES review (which is not the same). Annual review of progress toward tenure by the Department Tenure and Promotion committee and pairing each new junior faculty member with a senior level mentor is strongly suggested to enhance recruitment and retention of new faculty.

Administration

Currently there is a lack of infrastructure to support programs. The graduate programs are in need of stable Department and College leadership. New hires are expected to fill these roles and hopefully will provide stability which has not been experienced in the past several years. The new leadership must be able to share (and lead) in the Department's vision. The Department has some policies in place to guide faculty decision making but these are not in writing.

Mission and Vision

There is currently a lack of clear program vision and professional identity. One suggestion is to change the Department's name to Health Promotion which more closely reflects program strengths, future direction and faculty research activities.

Student Outcomes

The Department does not have SLOs which are measurable and achievable. If an accredited MPH program is to be developed, SLO's with ongoing data collection and evaluation of program effectiveness will be required. The most recent program evaluation was conducted in 2002. In order to assess program outcomes, strategies should be developed to maintain relationships with graduates. Some suggestions include: utilizing alumni for mentoring incoming students and involvement in pre-internship class; hosting networking opportunities for alumni and or development of a Department newsletter featuring graduates, program and faculty updates which could include alumni surveys.

Summary of Challenges and Opportunities

The Department has the ability to grow the graduate program to 20 – 40 students with new faculty hires. The Department goal is to obtain HCA accreditation and this seems obtainable, but the MPH is strongly suggested in order to increase visibility and credibility in the School of Osteopathic Medicine.

Some funding opportunities are in place. HEAF funding is available to support technology for research and for some laboratory setup but major funding needs to be developed to support graduate program expansion.

The missions of the program and the College and University are coming into alignment. Course content, objectives and descriptions are in the process of being rewritten to meet program goals. It will be difficult to bring the vision and mission into alignment until a clear vision for the MS program is identified. Some suggestions for curricular improvements include adding a communications class to the core, requiring statistics in both the thesis and non-thesis tracts, development of an epidemiology class and possibly a grant writing class. Other specific program areas which should be further developed have been mentioned by students. Reorganization of the research methods class to a face-to-face format is advisable to assist students with MS proposal writing. Additionally, all graduate students should receive ethics and IRB training and more practice reading and discussing research studies to develop a better understanding of research design. Students reported unanimously that the drug addiction course was largely repetitive of the undergraduate course. A solution might be to upgrade to a course in Mental Health, Brain Chemistry and Addiction. Currently there is little multicultural health content in the curriculum. Since this is such an important area, either a course or greater emphasis in a number of courses should be considered.

The Department needs to develop a better method to track retention. The retention data in the University report are not in agreement with the Department's knowledge of graduate student retention and success rates. In this regard (although the depth of the problem remains uncertain) the Department may consider development of a mid-point evaluation to determine MS students' critical thinking skills and identify those at risk for failing to complete program.

The Department is clearly in a position to play an important role in health promotion and has the potential to develop strong collaborations with osteopathic medicine, nutrition and exercise science.