

Public health summer program increases STEM career interests in high schoolers

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High school students who participated in summer programs about public health increased their interest in pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), according to a Rutgers study.

Published in the journal *Pedagogy in Health Promotion*, the study explored whether increasing public health awareness would motivate [high school students](#) to pursue public health careers.

Researchers found that the [summer program](#), Public Health: Outbreaks, Communities, and Urban Studies (PHocus) offered in 2018 and 2019 increased the students' knowledge in public health, epidemiology, urban public health and global public health.

"Including interdisciplinary, authentic learning experiences in our summer program enabled students to personally connect public health disciplines with their [personal experiences](#), as well as with population health in general," said Laura E. Liang, co-director of the PHocus Summer Experience and associate dean of academic affairs at the Rutgers School of Public Health.

While the students who went through the course in 2018 researched the 2018 influenza pandemic and those in 2019 investigated measles outbreaks in 2019, Liang says she expects future groups to examine public health through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"These personally relevant topics, supplemented by exposure to academic research practices, not only personally interested students but also aided in [student learning](#) and retention," she said.

Researchers, who point to a decline in an interest in the STEM field by middle and high school students, developed the summer program to address these issues and offer students seeking health science careers alternatives beyond becoming doctors or nurses.

Researchers said 130 students from 63 high schools participated in the week-long program, which provided insights into college plans, helped set professional goals and offered tips to taking control of their own

health.

The students gave the program, which provided an overview of public health, epidemiology, and health issues particularly relevant to adolescents, such as sleep hygiene, alcohol and tobacco, as well as the careers available in the field, a 100 percent rating. More specifically, nearly 90 percent of participants in the Summer 2018 cohort and 96 percent of participants in the Summer 2019 cohort felt PHocus provided valuable insight that will assist in their collegiate and career planning. Further, approximately 65 percent of participants from each summer cohort strongly agreed that PHocus provided high-quality information and strategies.

"Through our integration of current public health faculty and community sector partners, students can create interpersonal connections with [public health](#) professionals while also experiencing these professions through their immersion in simulations and activities," said Marian Passannante, co-director of PHocus and associate dean for Education Program Development and Global Programs at the Rutgers School of Public Health. "This allows students to explore the breadth of career opportunities in [public health](#) and encourages them to begin to think about their future."

Researchers said the easily replicable program demonstrated the value in hosting similar summer programming at other institutions to address students' declining interest in STEM fields.

More information: Laura E. Liang et al, A Public Health Summer Experience for High School Students, *Pedagogy in Health Promotion* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/23733799211017561](https://doi.org/10.1177/23733799211017561)

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