PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH COURSES: OVERVIEW & EVALUATION

OVERVIEW

Physical activity is a key health behavior for preventing cardiovascular disease, Type II diabetes, some forms of cancer, and age-related cognitive decline. However, most children and adults across the globe are not active at recommended levels. Training researchers and practitioners to promote physical activity is important for improving health outcomes worldwide.

The Physical Activity and Public Health courses, offered by the University of South Carolina, are multi-day trainings in which postgraduate researchers and practitioners gather to develop research and intervention strategies related to physical activity and public health. Overall, the program aims to improve the public's health by increasing the number of public health researchers and practitioners who have expertise in the relationship between physical activity and health in populations. The courses have trained 1,131 fellows to date; participants have represented 49 states and the District of Columbia and 22 countries outside of the U.S. In 2004, the courses received the CDC Prevention Research Center Award for Excellence in Training and Technical Assistance.

POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH COURSE

The researcher course was first offered in 1995 and has been offered in 22 of the years since (including 2022), resulting in more than 650 research fellows trained (20-35 fellows per year). The content and delivery of the research course have been guided by nationally and internationally known faculty in physical activity and public health. The aim of the 7-day course is to

equip early-career researchers with training to improve physical activity outcomes through their research. The course content focuses on current topics and trends within the physical activity and public health sector such as grant writing, physical activity measurement, clinical trials, epidemiology, interventions, health disparities, and policy. Ultimately, research fellows leave the course with increased capacity to design impactful physical activity research-oriented studies and grant proposals.

Over the almost 30 years that the research course has been offered, fellows have rated highly their experiences with the content and delivery of the course. Between 2006-2022, the vast majority of fellows indicated that the courses met their expectations (96%-100% for all years but one). Fellows provided high ratings for the course meeting its objectives, for the cost being commensurate with the experience, for the effectiveness of faculty presentations and group/individual meetings, and for course materials. Through survey, researchers stated that the course had a positive impact on their physical activity research (97.8%), helped develop their research question for physical activity research (96.1%), and helped them conduct higher quality physical activity related interventions/ programs (89.7%). As an example of satisfaction with the course, one participating fellow noted that,

> ***"The environment was fantastic. The faculty were top-notch and clearly invested in helping the fellows grow. The fellows were all very sharp as well, which solidified the atmosphere as being very immersive and growth-focused. I also appreciated the diverse range of interests and expertise represented by the faculty and fellows..."***

Other fellows found that their access to the esteemed faculty was a rare opportunity:

> ***"Informal interactions with faculty were great. I have never had such willing and open access to high-level faculty and felt the informal access was very strong."***

Many other fellows also noted that the ability to network with other researchers and practitioners was a great benefit of the course.

A follow-up survey with fellows who completed the course from 1995-2011 was conducted in April 2013 (see paper by Evenson et al., 2015).[1] A total of 322 fellows across the full range of course years completed the survey. Over 90% of fellows agreed or strongly agreed that the courses had positively impacted their work in physical activity and public health and helped them prepare higher quality grant proposals. Following the courses, 73% of fellows said that they had professional contact with the course faculty, and 71% said that they had professional contact with other fellows; most contact was initiated for collaboration on either grant proposals or manuscripts. Roughly one-third of fellows (35%) also indicated that changes were needed in the course content to meet current challenges in physical activity research and practice. Fellows suggested course topics and ideas for how to structure course sessions, which faculty were able to incorporate when planning future courses.

PRACTITIONER'S COURSE

The practitioner course was first offered in 1996 and has been offered in 20 of the years since (including 2022), resulting in 464 practitioners trained (between 12-33 practitioners each year). The course, which is typically offered for 4-6 days, is planned and taught by nationally and internationally known faculty and practitioners in the area of community-based physical activity interventions. Topics have included: public health models for physical activity promotion, evidence-based and best practice intervention strategies, policy and environmental supports for physical activity, program evaluation, partnership development, and health equity. The course includes practical field learning and is highly interactive. As a part of the curriculum, practitioners develop an action plan and receive feedback to address a specific issue related to physical activity and public health in their home or work community.

The practitioner course has been highly rated by course participants. Between 2006-2022, the vast majority of participating practitioners reported that the course met their expectations (90%-100%).

Most practitioners also indicated that the course objectives were met and that the faculty presentations were highly effective. Practitioners also provided their thoughts about the course, with responses including,

> ***"The course connects the participants to world renowned faculty and a diverse group of practitioners that I feel will always answer a phone call or email! I'm grateful for this experience!"***

Another practitioner responded,

> ***"The course was AMAZING - excellent resources, well-organized, diverse participants, and excellent instructors - and I feel privileged to have participated. I imagine several years from now, I will use the tools learned here. I will work on my plan this year (improving community engagement with focus groups, walk-audit, and connectivity) and possibly start with short-term changes next year."***

A follow-up survey with practitioners who completed the course from 1996-2011 was conducted in April 2013 (see paper by Evenson et al., 2016)[2]. A total of 186 practitioners across the full range of course years completed the survey. Over 90% of practitioners agreed or strongly agreed that the courses had positively impacted their work in physical activity and public health. Further, most agreed that the courses had helped increase their leadership role in the physical activity profession (87%) and helped them conduct higher quality evaluations (85%). Following the courses, 66% of practitioners said that they had professional contact with the course faculty and 56% said that they had professional contact with other course participants; most contact was initiated for assistance developing interventions or programs. When considering whether the courses helped them achieve physical activity-related accomplishments in their profession, most practitioners said that the courses helped them gain knowledge on key concepts and effectively network with other professionals.

CONCLUSION

The Physical Activity and Public Health Research and Practitioner's courses have been held in parallel since 1996. Overall, 1,131 national and international post-graduate fellows and practitioners have been trained through the courses. With the guidance and expertise of highly accomplished faculty members, the Physical Activity and Public Health courses have contributed to increasing capacity within the physical activity and public health domain. The courses have also provided early-career researchers and practitioners with tools to improve physical activity and public health in their communities.

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For more information about the courses, visit: **https://web.asph.sc.edu/paph/**

[1] Kelly R. Evenson et al., "Evaluation of the Physical Activity and Public Health Course for Researchers," *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* 12, no. 8 (August 1, 2015): 1052–60, https://doi.org/10.1123/jpah.2014-0284.

[2] Kelly R. Evenson et al., "Evaluation of the Physical Activity and Public Health Course for Practitioners," Research *Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 87, no. 2 (June 2016): 207–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2016.1146942.