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Edward M. Mamary
San Jose State University, edward.mamary@sjsu.edu

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Selecting for a Diverse Public Health Workforce - Community Health Education MPH Program Admissions at the California State University

Edward M. Mamary and Kathleen M. Roe

Department of Health Science, San Jose State University

Abstract

The population of California continues to become more diverse; it has become increasingly important for California universities to provide graduate education to underrepresented groups and to prepare culturally competent health educators whose skills are adapted to these dynamic demographic changes. This paper describes the graduate admissions requirements of the four California-based graduate programs in Community Health Education (CHE) accredited by the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) and uses the graduate admissions process at San Jose State University as a case example for selecting a cohort that reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of the state. The use of multiple methods of assessment and the avoidance of undue emphasis on standardized tests in the admissions selection creates a more equitable graduate admissions process.

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Keywords: master of public health, graduate school, diversity, admissions

Introduction

One of the principle objectives of the Nation's Healthy People 2010 is to "increase the proportion of all degrees awarded to members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups" in the health professions (Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). As the population of California continues to become more diverse, it has become necessary for California universities to provide graduate education to underrepresented groups and to prepare culturally competent health educators whose skills are adapted to these dynamic demographic changes.

This is particularly important because many employers require, at the minimum, a master's degree in community health education from a school or program accredited by the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH), which is an independent agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Accreditation by CEPH ensures that academic programs meet accepted standards within the public health profession. Accredited Masters of Public Health (MPH) degrees with specialization in

community health education are offered by schools of public health (SPH), graduate programs in community health education (CHE), and programs in community health and preventive medicine (CHPM) (Council on Education for Public Health, 2004). This paper describes the graduate admissions requirements of the four California-based CEPH accredited graduate programs in CHE and uses the graduate admissions process at San Jose State University as a case example for selecting a cohort that reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of the state.

Selecting for a Diverse Public Health Workforce

The racial and ethnic composition of California's population continues to change at an increasingly rapid pace. Latinos and Asians are the fastest growing populations in California, each with an average growth rate that is seven times faster than that for whites (Legislative Analyst's Office, n.d.). White non-Latinos comprised 57 percent of the state's total civilian population in 1990 but are now in the minority at 47% (California Department of Finance,

2003). Among California students, this trend is even more evident. White non-Latino students comprise only 35 percent of the 1999-2000 year school enrollment, a fact that is setting the stage for a much more diverse graduate student population in decades to come (California Department of Education, 2004).

Bearing out the principles adopted by the Council of Graduate Schools, the recruitment of individuals from historically underrepresented communities into graduate education not only enhances the academic experiences of students and faculty at participating institutions, but contributes to the larger society by promoting a multicultural workforce that reflects the diversity of the communities in which they work (Council of Graduate Schools, 2003). However, minorities continue to be underrepresented in graduate programs in general. Undue emphasis on traditional methods of assessment, such as undergraduate grade-point average (GPA) and standardized tests, have been implicated as main contributing factors for denial of admission to otherwise qualified minority applicants to graduate programs (Pruitt, 1998; Looney, 1990). Research has clearly shown that these two assessment measurements are unreliable predictors of academic success (Pruitt, 1998; Hagedorn & Nora, 1997). Standardized tests, in particular, discriminate against people of color if used as a sole criterion for graduate admission. Students of color traditionally do less well on such exams than their white counterparts (Hawkings, 1993). Because admissions policies have such an enormous impact on the numbers of minority students admitted to graduate academic programs, it is essential that graduate admission policies avoid over-reliance on these procedures if they are to meet the goal of a diverse graduate student class.

Admissions Requirements for California CHE Graduate Programs

Academic institutions use a variety of methods for selecting individuals for graduate study. Common assessment measures include standardized tests (most commonly the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), undergraduate grade-point average (GPA), and academic ranking of the baccalaureate program or

institution. Other assessment components include personal statements by applicants, interviews, and letters of recommendation (Brink, 1999; Looney, 1990).

Four California universities offer CEPH-accredited community health education graduate programs. All four are located within the California State University (CSU) system: CSU Long Beach, CSU Northridge, San Francisco State University, and San Jose State University. The methods used to assess applications by these four MPH programs were reviewed from information publicly available on their university websites.

A total of nine assessment methods was found among the four programs (see Table 1). Three of the methods are used by all institutions – the applicant's statement of purpose, letters of recommendation, and undergraduate grade-point average (minimum 3.0). All programs, except for San Francisco State University, require applicants to take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and to submit a biosketch or resume. Consistent with the *Guidelines for the Use of GRE Scores* (Graduate Record Examinations, 2002), all programs use multiple sources of information for their admissions selections, thereby promoting fairness by balancing the limitations of any one assessment method. The use of multiple assessment methods also expands the range of factors taken into consideration when purposefully selecting a diverse student body to serve an increasingly diverse population.

Academic Requirements: Three of the four programs require applicants to have satisfactorily completed specific upper division coursework prior to admission. San Francisco State University requires undergraduate courses in social science, statistics, and a course with cultural, ethnic, and social diversity content. An upper division biostatistics course is required as a prerequisite by CSU Northridge and a concurrent prerequisite once admitted to San Jose State University. Only CSU Northridge has a specific writing requirement, the Upper Division Writing Proficiency Examination, for students from institutions beyond the CSU

system. CSU Long Beach is the only program that specifies a cut-off for GRE scores, requiring a combined score of at least 1,000 on the verbal and quantitative sections.

Other Requirements: Both San Francisco State University and San Jose State University require

applicants to have a minimum two years of work or volunteer experience in health education, public health, or a related field. San Francisco State University indicates a preference for applicants fluent in a second language. None of the programs require interviews as part of their admissions selection process.

Table 1
Admission Criteria by Institution

	CSU Long Beach	CSU Northridge	San Francisco State University	San Jose State University
Statement of Purpose	X	X	X	X
Letters of Recommendation	X	X	X	X
GRE Scores	X	X		X
Writing Exam		X		
Course Completion		X	X	X
Biosketch/Resume	X	X		X
3.0 GPA	X	X	X	X
Two Years Experience			X	X
Proficiency in Second Language			X	

San Jose State University – A Case Example

The Masters of Public Health program at San Jose State University (SJSU) demonstrates how the selection process can be conducted in such a way as to ensure that the student body will represent the diverse backgrounds and communities of the region. The program is located in a part of the state that has seen dramatic population changes over the past 30 years, particularly in cultural diversity. Through careful attention to the selection process, the program has been able to admit annual cohorts of entering students that reflect this changing diversity. The selection principles have been in place since the program was founded (1970) and first accredited (1974), changing with the times and the dynamic needs of the local, state, and national public health workforce.

The SJSU MPH admissions process is firmly rooted in the overall conceptual framework of the MPH program. For over a

decade, the program has been guided by a set of core principles first articulated by the MPH Core faculty, students, and alumni; and periodically reviewed and reaffirmed by the current faculty and students. One principle in particular reflects the program’s commitment to a representative student body and informs the process for selecting each incoming class of MPH students:

“Respect for Diversity - Understanding and embracing both the potential and the reality of diversity, including the role and functions of privilege and power, and working for inclusive and respectful engagement of all sectors and experiences in a community.”

Another core concept is the MPH Program’s Diversity Statement, written and formally adopted by the MPH student body in 2000 (see Figure 1). These “guiding stars” establish the perspective from which individual applicant files are considered.

Our diversity honors experiences, visions, choices, and realities. It is open to varied cultures, classes, ages, genders, orientations, and abilities. It acknowledges differences and the sharing of the fascinating experiences and challenges of those differences.

Our diversity is built upon tenets of respect, support, inclusion, and representation. It embraces and honors community, ethnicity, spirituality, sexuality, gender, and culture.

Our diversity provides a philosophical outlook that searches to find the points of interconnectedness among us, and accepts that not all points of view connect.

Our diverse community resolves to create spaces for all voices and stories to be equally shared and heard.

Figure 1
SJSU MPH Program Diversity Statement

Each applicant file is reviewed by at least three members of the MPH Admissions Committee, two faculty members and one student. Highest priority is given to applicants with 1) strong academic backgrounds, 2) at least two years of work or volunteer experience (preferably with multicultural or underserved populations), 3) demonstrated commitment to public health, and 4) potential for making significant contributions to the field. Applicants demonstrating all four characteristics are immediately offered a place in the MPH program. Applicants demonstrating at least two of the four characteristics are carried forward into the second round of admissions deliberations.

All applicants are required to submit a statement of purpose, official transcripts, a resume describing the extent of professional work and/or volunteer experience, and letters of recommendation. The role of each required element in selecting a diverse student cohort is briefly described below.

The statement of purpose describes the applicant's goals, vision, and commitment to public health. It provides an opportunity for the Admissions Committee to evaluate the

applicant's reasons for pursuing an MPH degree in community health education at SJSU, while offering evidence of the applicant's "best writing." But even more importantly, the statement of purpose allows the Admissions Committee to see the way applicants are organizing and reflecting upon their life experiences and professional goals, particularly in the context of our increasingly multicultural society. Reading their own words helps the Committee determine whether applicants' aspirations are compatible with the academic and philosophical orientation of the SJSU MPH program, including our commitments to diversity. As the centerpiece of the admissions application, the statement of purpose is considered very carefully.

GPA, grades, and previous coursework are helpful in making decisions among applicants whose statements of purpose have demonstrated the potential for service, contribution, and leadership in a multicultural society. All successful applicants must have attained a 3.0 GPA for the last 60 credits of previous college coursework. In addition, applicants are expected to have a minimum B grade in any upper division courses in social science, health, and

math/statistics. This criterion often requires a very careful review of sometimes complicated transcripts. However, delving into the transcripts results in a more nuanced understanding of diverse applicants' academic strengths and potential than is evident from an upper division GPA alone. Applicants with tremendous potential but a lower GPA or pattern of lower grades in the core areas are strongly encouraged to take upper division courses in order to satisfy this criterion – and then to apply again. Many do just that, and go on to become accomplished graduate students and leaders in our community.

Although GRE scores are required, San Jose State University's program has never established a minimum required score. Lower GRE scores are used to help advise students who have been admitted to the program to plan a proper sequence and appropriate balance of MPH courses, and to recommend specific academic support services offered by the university.

Experience in health education, public health, or a related field, paid or volunteer and for at least two years, is required to be considered for admission to the program. This helps to ensure an orientation to social and community concerns, described by Cole as "productive involvement with social service activities, demonstrated understanding of community concerns, [and] personal aspirations that include service to others" (1998, p. 15). The MPH curriculum assumes that students will draw from their health-related work experiences when learning the more abstract concepts and theories in their coursework upon which their practical experience was based. The Admissions Committee also assumes that public health-related work experience will have further introduced applicants to the challenges and assets of diverse communities, thus preparing them to work with the program's diverse student body, faculty, and community partners.

Letters of recommendation are essential in assessing applicants' readiness for the rigors of graduate preparation in public health. The letters attest to applicants' current abilities as they will relate to achieving academic success in the MPH program. Two letters of recommendation are

required; applicants are highly encouraged to present one letter written by a professor which documents academic achievement and potential, and another letter from a current employer or volunteer supervisor who can describe the applicant's professional accomplishments, abilities, and potential. The letters often offer additional insight into the applicant's life experience, professional commitments, and potential for leadership, all of which are extremely helpful to Admissions Committee members as they strive to construct an entering cohort of well-prepared, disciplined, and excited future leaders who will both reflect and serve the diversity of California.

Selection in Context

The admissions selection process described above is just one of many reinforcing activities integral to the San Jose State University MPH Program's commitment to preparation of a diverse and accomplished public health workforce. Key among other program activities that create and sustain a climate of inclusion and support for diversity are:

Monthly MPH Information Meetings held throughout our service area for the seven months prior to the application deadline. These meetings, conducted by faculty-student teams, are designed to provide an open and honest conversation about our program goals and culture (including the last 30 minutes without the faculty member present).

Peer Mentors assigned by the student volunteer Mentor Coordinator, who matches new students with continuing students for communication and ongoing contact during the months before the semester starts. New students indicate the descriptive characteristics they desire in a mentor. Recent requests have included "African American woman", "first generation in the U.S.", "single parent", "gay man", "small town background", and a full range of other "demographics" that inform our understanding of the diversity represented in our new student cohort.

A semester course on multicultural communication, initiated by students over a

decade ago and one of the most rigorous in the program. The prominence of this course in the MPH curriculum speaks to the priority placed on the experience of diversity as opposed to just the selection of diverse individuals.

An annual Sexual Diversity Workshop, also initiated by MPH students and attended now by over 100 students from throughout the Health Science Department. This six-hour spring event brings attention to the added perspectives on diversity when examined through the lens of sexual orientation.

Attention to the diversity of classroom guests, fieldwork mentors, and assigned reading authors provides a rich environment within which a diverse student cohort prepares for professional practice and leadership in a diverse community. Inclusion and representation across such diverse characteristics as gender, race/ethnicity, immigration experience, sexual orientation, and age are considered when selecting class speakers, assigned authors, program guests, master class honorees,

fieldwork agencies, and others who will teach, honor, and inspire the next generation of public health professionals.

Conclusion

The use of multiple assessment methods and the avoidance of undue emphasis on standardized tests in the admissions selection process create a multidimensional review of each applicant and a more equitable graduate admissions process. In Looney's words, "We cannot continue to define academic quality using standards set from a limited perspective and expect students from diverse backgrounds and cultures to meet them. We must consider the wide variety of circumstances that influence their lives" (1990, p. 16). When grounded in broader program principles and commitments, the multiple assessment methods result in a diverse group of students who are then supported and inspired to embrace the diversity of their own cohort and the communities they will serve as practitioners and leaders of the public health workforce of the future.

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Author Information

Edward M. Mamary, DrPH, MS*
Kathleen M. Roe, DrPH, MPH
Department of Health Science
San Jose State University
One Washington Square
San Jose, CA, 95192-0052 USA
Telephone: 408-924-2986
Fax: 408-924-2979
E-mail: emamary@email.sjsu.edu

* corresponding author