FINAL REPORT
(January 19, 2010)

Oregon State University
College of Health and Human Sciences
Department of Public Health

Graduate Program Review Site Visit
May 16-18, 2010

Review Panel
Cheryl L. Addy, Arnold School of Public Health, University of South Carolina, Panel Chair
Susan Allan, Northwest Center for Public Health Practice, University of Washington
Denise Lach, Department of Sociology, Oregon State University
Tom Wolpert, Department of Botany and Plant Pathology, Oregon State University
Overall Recommendation

The Department of Public Health in the College of Health and Human Sciences at Oregon State University has an ambitious plan of growth and reorganization to become a College of Public Health and Human Sciences and an accredited school of public health. The external review was conducted in the midst of university and college reorganization and plans for the future were in great flux and ambiguity. This report is therefore a balance between an evaluation of the current resources and programs and a prospective assessment of the proposed expansion. The review panel was impressed with the strategic planning in the department and college, the growth that has already occurred in the last few years, the enthusiasm of the departmental faculty for this plan, and the broad participation in development of the self-study. However, the department currently has only minimally sufficient faculty resources and/or course work to support available academic programs (e.g., international health, epidemiology, biostatistics, and the doctoral programs). The review panel recommends that initial investments in departmental growth be dedicated to the currently active and newly-approved instructional programs and the infrastructure to support these programs and faculty research, independent of current or proposed organizational structure and before expansion into additional areas is considered. The external review team recommends that Oregon State University maintain the Public Health Graduate Program and strengthen it by addressing concerns raised in the review. On a separate note, the external review team does not see the currently-proposed timeline for the goal of being an accredited school of public health as realistic given current and proposed resources and systems.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Students and Instructional Programs

• Work with students to create processes that include them in the life of the department including appropriate involvement in departmental governance, their own student organization and a clear process for communicating concerns.
• As curricular programs continue to expand, develop course work to support programs. Assess, in particular, the scope and depth of offerings for doctoral students.
• Complete creation of a departmental process for supporting development, implementation and evaluation of internships for MPH students.
• Increase research support for students, especially PhD students. Include student support on all proposals for external funds.
• Become more involved in interdisciplinary efforts on campus; encourage students to participate in seminars, courses, etc. in areas that are relevant to public health.
• Continue efforts to recruit and support students from racial/ethnic minorities while exploring what diversity means to the department beyond the usual definitions of gender, race and ethnicity.

Faculty

• Expand faculty, especially for current offerings in international health and for approved offerings in epidemiology and biostatistics.
• Ensure that faculty are appropriately involved in the planning and implementation of major organizational and curricular changes, especially those faculty who have significant experience in other schools or programs of public health.

• Provide opportunities for professional development in all aspects of faculty expectation (e.g., research, teaching and advisement, leadership development).

Infrastructure and Resources

• Hire sufficient faculty to support current programs before expanding into other areas. There are already significant faculty deficits in several key areas in the context of the graduate programs and research productivity. Not adequately considered in the current evaluation is the significant demand on departmental resources for the undergraduate programs.

• Assure adequate staff support and infrastructure for all aspects of departmental productivity. An immediate need stated by the faculty is for research support. A second need is for student services, which may not require a major investment in personnel but rather development of more efficient processes and better communication with students (e.g., application, enrollment, and registration issues).

• Any reorganization should be based on logical groupings of programs and should involve broad faculty input. At the time of the review, the College of Human Sciences was proposing to reorganize its three departments into two schools. Given the minimum number of faculty required to be a stand-alone department, the proposed alignment into two schools is strong and reflects arrangements at other schools of Public Health. However, the Panel is concerned whether the proposed reorganization will provide the professional and organizational focus that is needed. The review panel recognized that “School A” included disciplines oriented toward the natural and physical sciences and “School B” included those disciplines related to the social sciences. However, it is not clear that this division creates any efficiency or facilitates any enhanced collaborations within the disciplines. The College should also consider whether nonstandard organizational structure and nomenclature may hinder the ability of the faculty to participate in the larger public health community, and be less attractive and more confusing for students. In this context, the review panel would recommend either a non-departmentalized college or divisions that reflect well-defined disciplines or groupings but which could perhaps share staff and some non-personnel resources. There may be an intermediate grouping such as family sciences, health behavior and health promotion, and human development; health policy and international health; epidemiology and biostatistics; exercise science and nutrition; and environmental health and occupational safety. The exclusion of design and human environments is unfortunate but reasonable if that department is not willing or able to shift their focus more toward health-related issues.

• As noted above, encourage and facilitate more involvement in interdisciplinary opportunities on campus. For example, the Environmental Safety and Health (ESH) program has evolved toward a relatively narrow focus rather than capitalizing on the broad expertise in environmental sciences across the campus. These activities will enrich experiences for both faculty and students.

• The department presents an ambitious plan for faculty recruitment. However, the availability of financial resources to meet this plan is not clear. According to Dean Tammy Bray, resources for the
ten positions projected by March 2011 are from internal reallocation; conservatively expenses could easily be over a million dollars in recurring salary and fringe benefits plus any necessary start-up commitments. Whether the resources are available from attrition or from explicit reductions, the department (or college) must be careful not to create critical deficits in other program areas. Also, any reductions in one area to enhance another could cause resentment, so open communication about the strategic planning is critical. Some of the proposed faculty growth is contingent on successful competition within the university’s strategic re-alignment process, suggesting that resources are not certain.

Detailed Findings

1. Introduction: Objectives of the review, participants, order of events, and organization of the report

At the request of Oregon State University, a four-member review team conducted an on-site review of the Department of Public Health in May, 2010. As its central objectives, the review team sought to assess the current structure, scope, and quality of the graduate programs in the department. In pursuing these objectives, the review team necessarily addressed related issues such as number and distribution of faculty, related programs and resources, and university budgeting guidelines. In all of its activities and deliberations, the review team followed the “Guidelines for the Review of Graduate Programs” provided by the Graduate Council of Oregon State University (approved May 2008) and consulted the “Self-Study: Review of Graduate Programs” submitted by the Department of Public Health (May 2010).

The review panel included panel chair Cheryl Addy (senior associate dean for academic affairs, Arnold School of Public Health, University of South Carolina), Susan Allan (director, Northwest Center for Public Health Practice, University of Washington), Denise Lach (Department of Sociology and Graduate Council, OSU) and Tom Wolpert (Department of Botany and Plant Pathology and Graduate Council, OSU); Dr. Wolpert was unable to participate in the on-campus site visit. Members of the review panel met from 6:00-8:30 pm on Sunday, May 16, 2010, and from 8:00 am to 7:00 p.m. on Monday, May 17, 2010. During the Monday sessions, members met with Martin Fisk, acting dean of the Graduate School, and Gita Ramaswamy, associate dean of the Graduate School. The sessions on Monday included interviews with administrators, faculty and students of the college and department. The on-campus review agenda ended in executive session, during which the review team drafted an initial set of recommendations, which it forwarded to the university in June 2010.

2. Inputs

2.1 The fit of the mission of the program and its relationship to the mission of the academic college and University mission

The mission of the program is the same as the mission of the College of Health and Human Sciences: It “advances knowledge, policies, and practices to enhance the lives, health, and environments of
individuals, families, and communities in Oregon and beyond.” This fits within the University mission: “As a land grant institution committed to teaching, research and outreach and engagement, Oregon State University promotes economic, social, cultural and environmental progress for the people of Oregon, the nation and the world.” In its strategic plan, the University references three signature areas of distinction, one of which is “Improving Human Health and Wellness”.

The program’s activities and goals fit within the stated missions of the College and the University. The concern is that there is no mission specifically for the program, to distinguish and focus its activities within the larger environment of the college and of the university. The program should have a mission that is compatible with those of the college and university, but that identifies the special roles and contributions of the program.

2.2 Quality of Students

In general, the students in both the MPH and the PhD programs appear to be of high quality as shown by their GPAs and high placement rates upon graduation. Students in the PhD program have received prestigious recognition, awards, and fellowships on a regular basis. MPH students have regularly been awarded OMPH (Oregon Master of Public Health) Outstanding Student Awards.

The review panel encourages the department to think about how the wide variety of students – the ages, experiences, first generation graduate students, and low-income – leads to a diverse student body, what kinds of services these students may expect or need as well as the competencies they bring to the program, and how existing students might serve as the “face” of diversity in the department. We also encourage the department to find ways to recruit minority students more successfully including direct mailings to undergraduate and graduate programs in parts of the country with larger minority populations and active recruitment of students from around the country who have received McNair fellowships (McNair fellowships are awarded to meritorious low-income and first-generation undergraduates from groups traditionally under-represented in graduate education).

2.3 Admissions Selectivity

As described by faculty and the self-study report, the admissions process is selective in that it examines not only undergraduate and graduate GPA and GRE scores, but also takes into consideration an applicant’s demonstrated capacity in jobs and life experience. This seems very appropriate for a program with an entering student average age of more than 35 years, although a quantitative comparison of applicants admitted and not admitted suggest the assessment process admits those applicants most qualified by traditional academic metrics. The academic qualifications of those offered admission have been stable for the last few years, with an average GPA of approximately 3.5, average GRE Verbal of 515, and average GRE Quantitative of 600 for MPH admissions (Appendix I, Table A). The number of applicants seems to fluctuate around 80. The number of doctoral applicants is much smaller (12-15 per year) with academic qualifications for those admitted similar to those of MPH admissions.

The department should continue to monitor and review their own processes and criteria for admission.
in light of the current high acceptance rate, to ensure that they do not lose appropriate selectivity in the interests of expanding the program.

2.4 Level of Financial Support for Students

The review panel congratulates the Public Health Department on their success in securing funds to support many graduate students through university, college, and departmental scholarships. In recent years, support for PhD students in particular has increased so the majority is receiving some kind of assistance. Students in some specialty areas (e.g., Environmental Safety and Health) are able to secure paid internships, although that is not common across all specialties. PhD students are also supported through graduate teaching assistantships, which is a standard practice and prepares students for academic jobs.

There does not appear to be a culture of faculty-funded research support for graduate students; only $26,000 from $3,000,000 in external grants was used to support a single graduate research assistantship during 2008-2009 (Appendix I, Table C). As the faculty become more active and successful in securing external funds, the review panel encourages them to provide more research assistantships for graduate students. Currently most doctoral students have graduate teaching assistantships, while some have scholarships from various sources.

2.5 Curriculum strength

Overall, the current MPH curriculum is strong for the fully-implemented concentrations. This curriculum was developed and evaluated in the context of program accreditation criteria from the Council on Education for Public Health. Because of the Oregon MPH program, OSU students have easy access to courses offered through the other collaborating institutions. Several students reported taking at least one course in Portland (either Portland State University or Oregon Health Sciences University). It was not clear to the review panel that the department has the resources to expand the MPH program to include additional concentrations as currently planned.

Of the four currently active concentrations in the MPH program, International Health (IH) is clearly the most popular, with 43 students. In contrast, a total of 46 students are enrolled in the ESH, Health Management and Policy (HMP) and Health Promotion concentrations combined. However, the IH concentration is the least supported by current faculty and available course work. One faculty member has primary responsibility for advising all IH students and coordinating IH internships. The IH concentration lists two courses in international/global health and other than one other course in medical anthropology, the remaining course work is all general public health with respect to the IH concentration. In other words, the IH concentration looks much like any other concentration in a core public health discipline with a limited emphasis in international health.

Students report need for more support for the required internship, including understanding requirements, site selection, and pursuit of funding, especially for international placements. This is
apparently a longstanding concern as it was cited in the most recent (2006) MPH program accreditation review for the collaborative program.

Historically, the department had two MS programs. Both have currently been suspended to allow the department to focus more completely on the MPH and PhD programs; the complete termination of the MS programs is anticipated.

The department currently offers three concentrations for the PhD in public health: ESH, HMP and Health Promotion and Health Behavior (HPHB). Over half of the current students are enrolled in the HPHB concentration. The 109 quarter credit hour curriculum includes 16 hours of public health core courses (MPH core or equivalent); 18 hours of courses in methodology and statistics, most of which are offered outside the department; 16 hours in the concentration area; and a cumulative 59 credit hours for proposal/grant writing, research project and manuscript, dissertation and doctoral seminar. From one perspective, the relatively small amount of formal course work suggests the curriculum follows a basic science philosophy for doctoral education (less course work and more independent research), but the minimal number of courses in the concentration area raises a concern that the department may not have adequate depth of course work for the doctoral programs. This was somewhat confirmed by doctoral students who indicated they often had to go outside the department or college to find appropriate course work and even then struggled to find relevant courses that were offered on a regular basis. In addition, the students seem unclear about the requirements for the second-year research project and manuscript, which is apparently a new policy for which guidelines are not yet clear to either faculty or students. The department should review the doctoral student handbook carefully to assure that the language about doctoral requirements is consistent with the Graduate School requirements, e.g., concerning the comprehensive exam.

2.6 Quality of personnel and adequacy to achieve mission and goals

The current faculty are well qualified for their positions. However, the quantity of faculty seems minimally adequate to support the current academic offerings. For example, the IH concentration critically needs more faculty to expand the course work and support the students. The department has an ambitious growth plan for the next few years, but some of the faculty expansion is contingent on new funding during a period of budget reductions and competition for limited available resources. The department must have the additional faculty to support the currently approved curricula (e.g., new concentration in epidemiology and biostatistics) before expansion into additional areas is considered. This need is especially critical in the context of also supporting a popular undergraduate program.

2.7 Level and quality of infrastructure

Faculty members expressed strong concern for the lack of infrastructure for research at either the department or college level. If the department expects to recruit and retain research-productive faculty, the infrastructure for pre- and post-award support (e.g., budget development and management, purchasing, human resources) for research activities must be provided at some level.
During the meetings, faculty shared few thoughts on general staff support in the department. The review panel met only one staff person (graduate programs manager and assistant to the chair). The college organizational chart listed a second person, the office coordinator, whose role was never referenced in the meetings. As the department pursues the intended growth in faculty and in academic program offerings, additional personnel will likely be needed both for general administration (e.g., human resources, budget, purchasing, and clerical support) and for the academic programs. For the latter, as the MPH program evolves out of the collaborative Oregon MPH program, additional infrastructure will be needed in the department. While the department can choose whether to maintain and expand the current centralized process for managing student applications and progress or to develop a more decentralized process, change must occur to provide sufficient support both for faculty and students. Masters students report concerns about apparent delays in communication between time of application, admission and information about enrollment. General communication about academic requirements, department and university policies, and relevant news and events is an ongoing challenge, exacerbated by websites that are difficult to navigate.

One specific detail noted is that all the course listings for the department are identified by “H”. As the varied concentrations develop, the department is encouraged to consider use of separate acronyms for the different disciplines to allow more efficient identification of the programs.

The division of responsibilities and the corresponding allocation of effort among the graduate coordinator and the concentration-specific graduate program coordinators was not clear to the review panel.

2.8 Quality of organizational support

As noted above, the university strategic plan includes three priority areas, one of which is “Improving Human Health and Wellness.” While the dean of the college has a vision of expanding the focus on public health throughout the programs of the college, it is not clear that the corresponding university priority has been translated into any campus-wide activities or developments. The university includes many other subject areas that would create mutual benefit if connected to the public health program and it is striking that there has been relatively little involvement with the many rich university programs beyond the college.

The other area of organizational support that was of concern was the sense voiced by many of the faculty that they have not been effectively used as a resource and sounding-board by the college and university as the proposals for reorganization and other major changes are being developed. Faculty who have considerable experience in the field of public health and experience at other academic institutions can help identify ways in which the proposed changes may be attractive or present barriers to the recruitment of new faculty and students, and may facilitate or hinder their participation in the professional community. They acknowledged that there had been opportunities to voice their opinions, but they identified a “top-down” approach that did not obviously incorporate or respond to their suggestions and concerns. Faculty highly value their role in governance, so communication and some
level of transparency are critical during this period of organizational change and budget reduction and reallocation.

3 Productivity

3.1 Level and Quality of Student Performance

The level and quality of student performance for both the MPH and PhD program is high. Two-year graduation rates for MPH cohorts is typically high (usually more than 90%), which is a strong indicator that students are performing as expected. The department reports 24 doctoral graduates for the period 2004 through 2008. In contrast to current enrollments dominated by the HPHB concentration, dissertation titles reflected more preference for the HMP concentration.

As described above, both MPH and PhD students regularly receive recognition from others for their scholarly activities. In addition, PhD students are presenting at professional conferences and publishing in peer-reviewed journals on a regular basis.

3.2 Level and quality of faculty performance

The department reports a highly commendable increase in research productivity as measured by receipt of grants, publication of peer-reviewed manuscripts and presentations at professional meetings, both in absolute numbers and on a per faculty basis. The department has been intentional about encouraging research and recruiting senior faculty with active research agendas, and the success of this strategy is evident. Over the five years covered in the self-study, scholarly activity increased substantially by a variety of metrics: peer reviewed publications and presentations, citation counts, and external funding.

However, this success seems to have come with a significant cost to the academic programs. In both meetings with students, the review panel heard concerns about the quality of instruction and the advisement process. Student perception of teaching suggests that some faculty are outstanding instructors and some are ineffective for a variety of reasons. Specific negative examples include instructors who seemed to have no passion for the subject being taught and a class in which students were assigned topics to present for most class lectures but had little support or feedback from the instructor for doing so.

Faculty have primary responsibility for academic advisement of students, but the students report difficulty finding basic information about required documentation, registration procedures, etc. Students also report limited career-counseling support, other than inconsistent individual mentoring. Doctoral students do not understand the rationale behind or the process for the second-year research project and manuscript. A major concern from the MPH students is the lack of infrastructure for identifying and developing internship projects.

The department is commended for the broad participation of faculty in developing the self-study for this external review and in the site visit meetings.
3.3 Viability of Scholarly Community within Which Students can Interact

There appears to be little participation by graduate students in the life of the department or program. They do not participate in departmental decision-making and do not appear to have any governance structure of their own at OSU. Students do participate in governance of the OMPH program, but that is not a substitute for involvement with the OSU department. There is not a student organization that can bring graduate students together for professional and social purposes. While the department has supported peer-to-peer mentoring in the past, it appears as if this program is no longer in existence. The review panel was also surprised at how insulated students in this program are from other scholarly activities at OSU, particularly interdisciplinary programs for which expertise in public health would be welcomed and is needed, such as climate change. Faculty in the department are also somewhat isolated, so it is difficult for them to introduce their students to other opportunities on campus.

4. Outcomes

4.1 Professional viability of graduates

This is an area that merits some additional attention by the department and college, in that both MPH and doctoral students expressed a desire for more career counseling. From the survey information, site visit interviews and other information available for the review, it appears that MPH graduates have been able to obtain appropriate employment. As noted previously, some students have distinguished themselves professionally by winning various professional awards. However, many students expressed concerns that career counseling is limited and haphazard rather than systematic and explicit. Some students praised the assistance with career development provided to them by individual faculty. But others, especially doctoral students, voiced uncertainty about what their next steps should be and were frustrated with the lack of guidance in identifying a professional path. This may be an area where the students are looking for activities to be provided by OSU rather than by the OMPH program.

4.2 Satisfaction of students and graduates

During the site visit, there was the opportunity to talk with students from a range of degree programs and representing first year students through recent graduates. Results from student surveys were also available for review. In the meeting with the students, they appeared to be frank and reasonably expansive in their statements. It was striking that the students voiced a wide range of experiences and opinions about almost every aspect of the program, and that almost every opinion or experience voiced by a student was countered by an opposite experience from another student. Some students felt they had been well-served by virtually every aspect of the program, including the curriculum, teaching, advising, and career development. Others felt that almost every aspect of the program had been problematic. Particularly striking were the concerns voiced by more than one student about the following: lacking or inadequate career advising and development; quality of teaching (apparently a couple of teachers demonstrate little passion or enthusiasm); and difficulty obtaining the depth of coursework or availability of appropriate coursework that they need for their course of studies.
The most problematic concern is that when students were asked about the channels available to them for communicating their concerns to the program or college administration, they were not able to identify any regular or explicit ways to bring their concerns and recommendations to the program administration or faculty. They referenced instead their participation with the Oregon MPH program and student participation in committees and activities of the OMPH. But it was apparent that the OMPH channels are not a fully-satisfactory substitute for a more immediate communication and involvement with the OSU program.

4.3 Rankings/Rating

There is no official ranking or rating of Public Health programs, and the review panel does not perceive the US World and News Report ranking as a credible assessment of academic excellence. We do note, however, that the Oregon MPH program received accreditation from the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) in 2006. This indicates that the Public Health Program at OSU is a key component of the collaborative program that is meeting the standards of the public health discipline. However, because the accreditation includes consideration of resources and programs of OHSU and PSU, the significance specifically for the OSU program is limited. It is also to be noted that the accreditation did not include consideration of the doctoral programs, and that no rating is available that pertains to the doctorate.

5. Conclusion

The Department of Public Health offers the Master of Public Health and PhD degree programs with concentrations for both degrees in a variety of disciplines. The MPH is currently offered in conjunction with the CEPH-accredited Oregon Master of Public Health collaboration. However, the department and college are considering withdrawal from the collaboration as one step toward a larger goal of becoming an accredited school of public health. A major organizational change to transform the current College of Health and Human Sciences to the College of Public Health and Human Sciences is scheduled for 2011 in conjunction with the planned initial application for CEPH accreditation. Associated with this organizational change is an ambitious effort to hire ten new faculty in the next 12 months and several more after that. The review panel believes some faculty growth is critical to maintain the currently active and approved instructional programs before any expansion is considered. Several of the programs do not have adequate faculty and/or course work now, and the department does not have the professional staff and infrastructure to support the expansion. In particular, this review highlights several limitations of support for faculty research, student advisement and career counseling, and student support and services in general. However, this concern should not negate the tremendous progress and growth the program has experienced in the last few years. Because of the advocacy of the department chair and college dean, public health is highlighted as a critical component of the university’s strategic plan and therefore should be a priority area for strategic allocation of resources.