

School of Public Health Task Force Report Executive Summary

The charge for the task force was:

- To explore the mechanism for creation of a School of Public Health at VCU.
- To create a long-term plan for establishment of the school that includes the major steps, budgetary implications, and time line
- To submit a report to Dr. Retchin for review by VCU senior leadership

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Dr. Richard Wenzel submitted a report on initial thoughts for a VCU School of Public Health to Dr. Eugene Trani in May 2002. This report was on the heels of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the anthrax attacks. At this time, there was emphasis on statewide preparation for bioterrorism and Dr. Wenzel's report stressed the importance for a VCU School of Public Health having strong links with state and federal agencies with a mission "To improve the health of citizens of the Commonwealth of Virginia." Dr. Mary Nettleman prepared a subsequent report that evaluated the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) accreditation standards from the perspective of the current resources at VCU. In her report, Dr. Nettleman suggested potential administrative structures for a VCU School of Public Health with five departments, paralleling the five core areas required for accreditation. Her report identified the Departments of Health Administration, Biostatistics, and Preventive Medicine & Community Health as having existing curriculum that would form the foundation for three of the five required core areas.

TASK FORCE PROCESS

In July 2003, Dr. Sheldon Retchin, Vice President for Health Sciences, appointed Drs. Hermes Kontos and David Sarrett to co-chair a task force and requested that a final report be submitted by January 2004. As task force members were appointed, they were sent a copy of the Dr. Mary Nettleman report for background information. In preparation for convening the task force, Drs. Kontos and Sarrett explored administrative structures for establishing an initial School of Public Health by meeting with the Departments of Biostatistics, Health Administration, and Preventive Medicine and Community Health to discuss their participation in formation of a public health school. Three common themes emerged from these meetings. First, a VCU School of Public Health was considered an initiative that was right for VCU and that VCU is the logical university in the state to house a school of public health. Second, the school would have to be built in steps as resources are added. Third, the faculty felt it

was important to have a plan leading to an independent accredited VCU School of Public.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) recently published *Who Will Keep the Public Healthy? Educating Public Health Professionals for the 21st Century* (hereafter referred to as the IOM report). This report was reviewed and considered during the task force's work. The first meeting of the task force was held on November 24, 2003 and the members were provided with the information gathered since the formation of the task force for discussion. The meeting lasted two hours and it was concluded that a VCU School of Public Health should be established, however, questions regarding administrative structures and resources needed further discussion. A draft report was prepared and distributed for discussion prior to the second task force meeting on December 18, 2003. Drs. Trani and Retchin attended this meeting. The discussion at this meeting was focused on the existing resources at VCU and how this should determine the mission focus for a VCU School of Public Health, potential administrative models, the approval process for a new school, and developing the needed resources to create an accredited school.

RATIONALE FOR A VCU SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Demand for public health graduates

There is a large and growing need for public health professionals. This need exists nationwide and the Commonwealth is not exempt from this need. Included in this report is a letter from Dr. Robert Stroube, State Health Commissioner, stating that a School of Public Health at VCU "would be a great asset to the Virginia Department of Health." The IOM report documents that only a small percentage of the current public health workforce has graduate degrees in public health. Recent events are likely to further increase the need for public health professionals markedly, over and above existing levels. Most important of these is the occurrence of bioterrorism and the risk for additional bioterror attacks, possibly including biological and chemical weapons. Emergence of new infectious diseases, such as SARS, increases further the need for public health professionals. The demand for effective large-scale interventions to decrease the prevalence of substance abuse problems and interpersonal violence will require additional public health professionals.

There are currently 34 accredited schools of public health in the United States. An additional six schools of public health are new established and are seeking CEPH accreditation. The 2003 U.S. Census Bureau estimates that Virginia's population is 7.4 million. There are 12 states with population of 7 million or greater. Of these 12 states, Virginia is the only state without a school of public health. There are 26 states with population greater than 4 million and only five of these states (CO, IN, TN, VA, WI) do not have schools of public health.

Virginia has four programs for masters of public health (MPH). The oldest program is at Virginia Commonwealth University; it has been in existence for ten years and has gone through two accreditation cycles. Eastern Virginia Medical School (EVMS) and Old Dominion University (ODU) have collaborated in the last two years to create a new MPH program. A third program has just been approved at the University of Virginia.

A consortium program between EVMS, ODU, George Mason University, and James Madison University has recently been announced (<http://www.commonwealthmph.org/>) creating the Commonwealth MPH to be offered entirely through distance learning. A search of the SCHEV database reveals the number of MPH graduates per year from Virginia public institutions ranged from 22 to 31 from 1999 to 2003. The recently established Ph.D. program in Epidemiology at VCU is the first doctoral level public health degree program in Virginia. The public health schools in other states, and especially in the surrounding states, are also unlikely to fulfill the Commonwealth's need for public health professionals. Accordingly, it is necessary to create new programs, preferably in an accredited School of Public Health. Virginia does not have a School of Public Health.

Existing VCU Resources

Virginia Commonwealth University is in the best position of all public universities in the state to create a School of Public Health. VCU has the only comprehensive health sciences campus in Virginia. This campus is an ideal location for a new School of Public Health School. It provides excellent opportunities for collaboration between a public health school, the other five health sciences schools, and other agencies including the Virginia Department of Health.

Five core components are required to establish an accredited School of Public Health: epidemiology; biostatistics; health services administration; behavioral health; and environmental health. VCU has departments in three of the five core areas. The Department of Biostatistics in the School of Medicine has MS and PhD programs and supports funded research in all areas of health sciences. Epidemiology is in the Department of Preventive Medicine & Community Health in the School of Medicine; it has the oldest MPH program in the state, has recently initiated a PhD in Epidemiology, and has a significant amount of externally funded research. Finally, the Department of Health Administration in the School of Allied Health Professions offers a Master of Health Administration (MHA), Master of Science in health administration and a doctoral program in Health Services Organization and Research. The School of Government and Public Affairs' faculty has expertise in and a history of funding in community health policy that can contribute to health services administration core area. The school's Center for Public Policy and Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory have a long history of work in public health policy. The Center for Environmental Studies at VCU Life Sciences currently collaborates with other units including NIH, DOD, and the City of Richmond on funded research relating

to environmental health and waterborne biological and chemical hazards. The Center's spatial data laboratory conducts GIS training and research on environmental health applications for state and county departments of health. The School of Social Work is the oldest in the south (1917) and is nationally ranked (13th by US News & World Report) out of approximately 150 MSW programs nationally. The School of Social Work has existing courses that may provide course options for the social/behavioral health component in public health. There is also the potential to develop combined MSW/MPH degree programs to meet a growing need for public health social workers. A review of existing courses indicates that VCU already offers most the required course work for students in the five core areas.

External Resources

Within a short distance from VCU are located other units that can add adjunctive strength to the School of Public Health. No other university in Virginia has comparable external resources to support a school of public health. The location of VCU in the capital of Virginia, in close proximity to the state office for the Virginia Department of Health, is a strong asset. This proximity provides the opportunity for collaboration and for training of students and graduates. Dr. Robert Stroube, State Health Commissioner for the Virginia Department of Health, supports the establishment of a School of Public Health at VCU. Other units with public health related activity in close proximity to VCU include the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation, and Substance Abuse Services, the Department of General Services, Division of Consolidated Laboratory Services, and the Virginia Biotechnology Research Park. The Virginia Biotechnology Research Park is the home to more than 45 biosciences companies, research institutes affiliated with the VCU Medical Center and major state and national medical laboratories.

ADMINISTRATIVE MODELS

The task force examined several possible administrative structures with the long-term goal of establishing an independent School of Public Health. The most direct and obvious one is to put all the components that are needed for the establishment of the School of Public Health under unified leadership in one location. This approach has the advantage of firmly establishing the intent of the University to create a School of Public Health. The task force also considered a matrix model following the VCU Life Sciences approach. The model has great appeal in that existing departments remain within their academic schools with their existing faculty and budgets. This would be the quickest, and possibly the least expensive way to create a Public Health initiative at VCU, however, this structure would not meet the CEPH standards for accreditation.

The task force considered a number of other approaches that can proceed in a two-step process utilizing the Departments of Biostatistics, Preventive Medicine & Community Health, and Health Administration to first create a School of Public

Health within one of the existing health sciences schools. The two-step process has the advantage of making possible early approval of a School of Public Health. Once the remaining components for an accredited school are in place, the new school would become independent. There are currently 33 accredited schools of public health and only two are within a school or college of medicine. It appears from these data that using a two-step approach is not uncommon and has been used by other institutions to eventually establish independent accredited schools of public health. A significant concern is duplication of accreditation for programs in Health Administration. Currently, the Accreditation Commission on Education in Health Services Administration (ACEHSA) accredits the educational programs in the Department of Health Administration. Establishment of an accredited School of Public Health will require that the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) also accredit the programs in Health Administration.

FINANCES

To make enrollment projections, data from the Association of Schools of Public Health were reviewed. A budget projection was completed assuming an enrollment growth of 150 new students over five years and a gradual shift from 10% to 15% out-of-state. This projection indicates new resources of three million dollars per year will be needed in year five to sustain existing programs and establish the new school.

FACILITIES

It will be important to establish a physical identity for the VCU School of Public health at the outset. This will demonstrate a commitment to building the school and facilitate the faculty interactions required to organize the individual units into a functioning school. It is feasible that Biostatistics could be moved from Sanger to Grant/Leigh Houses to join Preventive Medicine & Community Health and Health Administration to establish the initial location for the School of Public Health. This will require relocating some other VCU support units. Any growth beyond this would require adding to Grant/Leigh Houses or new construction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The task force developed a list of recommendations that are summarized below.

I. Virginia does not have a comprehensive program in public health and VCU should establish an independent, accredited School of Public Health.

II. The mission and focus for the school should be something special, unique, and innovative to set us apart from the other schools that are within easy driving

distance of Richmond. We should consider informatics, information systems, and technology as one key area where we can shine. We could consider partnerships with the state and local health departments and make the Richmond area a genuine public health laboratory, covering the gamut of public health/health services issues. Such efforts have been tried before, but have not had the necessary support and resources. Practice and research could be combined nicely in this “community oriented public health” model. The IOM report recommended genomics and cultural competence as areas of specialization for Schools of Public Health. These are also areas of strength for VCU. The new school should focus on key cutting-edge public health areas including: bioinformatics; public health forensics and forensic epidemiology; pharmacogenomics and public health (genetic epidemiology); and terrorism and public health preparedness.

~~II. The mission and focus for the school should be something special, unique, and innovative to set us apart from the other schools that are within easy driving distance of Richmond. The mission should leverage the existing strengths of VCU in areas such as informatics, information systems, and genomics and should partner with the state and local health departments to make the Richmond area a genuine public health laboratory, covering the gamut of public health/health services issues.~~

III. The University should commit to a five-year time line to build the resources for the school. During this five year period, the School will be expected increase its enrollment to meet the projected target. The School will also be expected to increase its funded research and service contracts to meet projected targets.

IV. The school will be expected to establish all five core areas and become fully accredited within five years.

V. The task force recommends two possible administrative pathways to establish an independent school. The two recommended pathways are as follows.

A. Establish the School as the sixth health sciences school at the VCU Medical Center directly.

B. Establish the School of Public Health within the School of Medicine as a two-step process to an independent school.

VI. Appoint an interim director or dean with public health training to provide leadership through university and SCHEV processes to establish the school.

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