

**THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PUBLIC HEALTH INTERNSHIP PROGRAM:  
A COLLABORATIVE PROGRAM TO GIVE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS THE  
OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE CAREERS IN EPIDEMIOLOGY AND PUBLIC HEALTH  
LABORATORY SCIENCE**

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Educating and training the next generation of public health professionals to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is of paramount importance. University students are keenly interested in learning about current topics in public health, but they have little understanding about the educational pathways and training that lead to public health careers. Thus, the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin), the Texas Department of State Health Services (TDSHS) and the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department (ATCHHSD) are collaborating to provide students with opportunities to conduct goal-oriented, one-semester research projects in epidemiology or laboratory science under the mentorship of state and local public health scientists. This program is being offered for the first time with the generous support of the Texas Health Foundation. Each of the 25 junior, senior or post-baccalaureate students participating in the program earns 3 hours credit in Biological Sciences. To apply for admission, students must have a cumulative grade point average of 3.0/4.0 and have completed pre-requisite coursework in microbiology. Interns are chosen by a competitive application process, including an interview. A description of the research projects and the application can be found at the website of the Natural Sciences Career Services (<http://careers.ns.utexas.edu/phi/>). Applicants respond to questions regarding their interests and skills, rank the projects, and submit a resume and two letters of recommendation. They are then invited to a reception to meet the mentors who will supervise each project. Students chosen as interns complete 180 hours of work for the semester and are evaluated based on measurable outcomes, including attendance, on-the-job performance, the maintenance of journals, and final oral presentations and written reports summarizing their results.

UT Austin students are being positively impacted to pursue careers in public health as a result of this program. Two student interns, who completed epidemiology projects during the fall semester, have been accepted into highly ranked graduate programs (including Harvard and Emory) and they will pursue MPH degrees in epidemiology and become public health epidemiologists. They credit their success in the application process to the real-world experience they gained in this program. Another epidemiology intern has applied for admission to graduate programs in pharmacy in order to become a pharmacoepidemiologist. Interns completing laboratory science projects also have expressed that this experience has been life changing. One young woman has written, "This project not only taught me valuable laboratory skills but also showed me the importance of doing research. This internship has given me skills that I will use for the rest of my life and confidence in my abilities and in myself."

Challenges encountered during the development of this program have included securing adequate funding, completing necessary educational affiliation agreements, refining the application process, and developing evaluation instruments that fairly measure each intern's progress. Interns have gained many "unexpected" benefits from this program, including 1) an in-depth appreciation of the research process and greatly improved oral and written

communication skills, 2) an understanding of the differences between a university setting and a professional work environment, and 3) the chance to work alongside generous mentors who so willingly share their knowledge of public health and their personal experiences in the field. TDSHS and ATCHHSD are benefiting from this collaboration because student interns assist with the development of new laboratory methodologies and the collection and assessment of information related to the incidence and epidemiology of infectious diseases. Data and results from student work also are being submitted in a manuscript to a refereed journal. Such contributions enhance the ability of these agencies to effectively develop and implement intervention and control measures that benefit all the citizens of Texas. Finally, through this collaborative program, the university and its public health partners are contributing to the education and development of future members of the public health workforce to help meet shortages in our city, state and nation.