

Alliance to Advance Liberal Arts Colleges (AALAC)  
Faculty Workshop Program  
Spring 2020

**Proposed Workshop:** *Global and Public Health in the Liberal Arts: Confronting the Juggernaut*

**Workshop Liaison:** Christopher Dole, [cdole@amherst.edu](mailto:cdole@amherst.edu), Amherst College

**Workshop Co-Organizers:**

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Gabriela Morales, Scripps College  
Cal Biruk, Oberlin College  
Betsey Brada, Reed College  
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**Location and Timing:** Amherst College, Spring 2020

**Participants:** Up to 15 participants from AALAC member institutions plus interested colleagues from non-member Five College institutions.

**Workshop Description:**

Ever since 2003, when the Institute of Medicine called for undergraduates to be educated in the principles of public health, there has been an increase in undergraduate public health and global health programs, especially at large universities (Brewer 2017; Drain et al. 2017). Liberal arts colleges have taken a more restrained approach, with only a few AALAC colleges now offering majors in public or global health (Hill 2012; Robinson et al. 2018). The proposed workshop is designed to examine the unique challenges that face liberal arts college faculty as we respond to demands for more public and global health offerings.

The pressure to incorporate public health into the liberal arts curriculum is coming from above and below. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has teamed up with the Association of Schools and Program in Public Health (ASPPH) to promote undergraduate public health education. This powerful collaboration is driving growth in professionalized undergraduate public health majors based on “core public health competencies” (ASPPH 2012), a central goal of which is to prepare a workforce of entry-level health professionals (Rozier and Scharff 2013). Undergraduate students, too, are demanding health-related coursework, with an increasing number requesting permission to design their own interdisciplinary majors.

Liberal arts faculty have responded to these pressures with enthusiasm and caution. Many of us have long been committed to broad-based approaches to health and disease, but we are wary of importing technocratic or reductionist public health materials into the liberal arts curriculum. Before undergraduates are asked to solve complex global health problems, they must first understand how

different people conceive of suffering and “dis-ease,” why illness is distributed unequally across populations, and what the framework of “public health” might leave out. We would argue that history, literature, and philosophy – in addition to biology and statistics – are integral to preparing students for global and public health leadership. The liberal arts is an ideal place for students to discover holistic, integrative analyses of fundamental concepts, as well as to reflect on their role in a world where global health governance increasingly shifts away from coordinated international efforts toward philanthropic efforts and do-it-yourself humanitarianism. Our students who go on to graduate school in public health tell us that their curriculum leaves little room for such conceptual discussions. We suspect that the growth of utilitarian, practice-based approaches to public health education results, in part, from a dearth of viable alternatives. This may explain why many AALAC colleges have opted for holistic approaches to disease and healing grounded in the liberal arts principle of critical reflection.

Our own experience tells us that liberal arts faculty are typically facing the public health juggernaut in isolation, and that we would benefit enormously by sharing our experiences. To our knowledge, this will be the first workshop of its kind, reserved exclusively for faculty members from liberal arts colleges who increasingly grapple with these issues. We expect that our conversation will draw on our own critical health scholarship as well as conversations on our home campuses about the promise and perils of undergraduate public health (see Biruk 2018; Brada 2011; Jackson 2016; Morgan, Knight, and Gubrium 2016). We expect to learn about our colleagues’ theoretical and ethical convictions, communication tactics, philosophical approaches, curricular strategies, and innovative experiential opportunities as they have constructed public health education in a liberal arts mold.

The goal of this workshop is to articulate a comprehensive set of liberal arts alternatives to educating students about health and disease. We will strive to achieve the following goals: 1) to help our institutions communicate the advantages of the liberal arts to a highly motivated and diverse group of prospective students who wish to study global and public health; 2) to promote integrative, experiential, health-related learning (including internships and study abroad) grounded in historical awareness and ethical reflexivity; and 3) to articulate a robust justification for holistic liberal arts approaches to undergraduate global and public health education.

## References

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