



February 2025

Alameda County Public Health Department Academic Health Department Partnerships Environmental Scan

Executive Summary

Introduction

At the request of the Alameda County Public Health Department, the Public Health Foundation (PHF) conducted an environmental scan to better understand areas of opportunity for the development of Academic Health Department (AHD) partnerships. AHD partnerships are a formal affiliation between an academic institution and a public health practice organization. AHD partnerships can enhance public health education and training, research, and service and may offer a variety of benefits, both for the organizations involved and for the community as a whole.

Methods

To best understand the areas of potential formal partnerships with the Alameda County Public Health Department, PHF conducted 10 interviews with 14 key informants from three academic institutions: The University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley); California State University, East Bay (Cal State East Bay); and Touro University (Touro). The objectives of the interviews were to assess existing relationships and identify new opportunities for collaboration. Interviews were conducted in November and December of 2024. Sixteen potential participants from the three academic institutions were invited by the Alameda County Public Health Department's Health Director to participate in the interviews. Topics discussed during the 60-minute interviews included past and existing partnerships, challenges and future partnership opportunities, and ways the academic institution and the Alameda County Public Health Department can work together to strengthen the public health workforce.

Key Findings

- All participants from the three academic institutions expressed the value of relationships and partnership with the Alameda County Public Health Department. They view the health department as a key partner and leader in the state, particularly regarding health equity initiatives. Participants also discussed the commitment of Alameda County Public Health Department staff and emphasized the importance of students learning from highly skilled, committed, and diverse public health professionals through internships, capstone projects, and co-teaching opportunities. There was overall agreement that the AHD partnership would help all parties involved achieve more together and broaden the reach of public health programs.
- All three academic institutions have had successful internships with the health department, with many students transitioning to full-time positions upon graduation. There is a desire to formalize this process to ensure that it is equitable and does not only rely on students reaching out to alumni. There were also discussions about ensuring that all internship experiences are more consistent in quality and engagement.
- Touro's and Cal State East Bay's student bodies tend to be made up of more non-traditional students (e.g., first-generation, low-income, full-time employed). Cal State East Bay participants expressed the need to "make the case" for why their students are as capable as UC Berkeley students. Importantly, Cal State East Bay students are more

likely to be residents of Alameda County and intend to return to their communities out of a desire to make a difference and give back. They described taking students from “cradle to career” and emphasized the importance of serving the same constituency.

- Cal State East Bay only has undergraduate students, so they shared some concerns about managing expectations regarding the level of work that students can produce during internships compared to MPH and doctorate-level students from other institutions. UC Berkeley participants felt strongly that their MPH and DrPH students could contribute substantially to the health department’s data analytics and program evaluation capacity.
- Participants from all three institutions expressed that a formalized AHD agreement would be beneficial, although UC Berkeley shared that they are not as inclined to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), but are interested in a data use agreement. Touro has a formalized agreement with Solano County that they believe is working very well for their students and faculty.
- UC Berkeley and Touro offer online MPH programs that are flexible enough for health department staff to complete while working full-time. In addition, all three institutions provide certificate programs, non-credit-bearing micro-courses, and seminars. Touro expressed concerns about ensuring that once HD staff complete either a degree program or a credential, they have opportunities for career advancement within the health department. Touro is also interested in receiving input from the Alameda County Public Health Department on their MPH curriculum to ensure that graduates are well-prepared for roles within the health department.
- UC Berkeley appears to be the strongest research partner, with robust capacity from both students and faculty, as well as strong expertise as the birthplace of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). Cal State East Bay’s research focus is primarily on the impact of policy, with a goal of making research and publications more accessible to the community, rather than solely focused on academics. Touro expressed interest in engaging with the Alameda County Public Health Department to shape their research agenda.
- The biggest barrier that came up with all participants was navigating bureaucracy within two large systems—the academic institution and the health department. Participants emphasized that developing these partnerships, securing contracts, and ensuring timely payment for faculty, staff, and students involved in partnership activities are particularly time-consuming. While partnerships inherently require time to build and strengthen, the complexity of these processes within both institutions adds additional challenges. Regular communication and having dedicated staff to manage logistical components, such as contracts, funding, and administrative coordination, were suggested as key strategies to ease these burdens. This would allow faculty to focus on education and research, and for the health department to focus on service. Participants from UC Berkeley and Cal State East Bay highlighted the misalignment of faculty incentives as a significant barrier. The current system of “soft money,” promotion, and tenure often prioritizes academic publication over engagement with health departments. UC Berkeley is exploring ways to realign incentives to better support faculty participation in these partnerships. In contrast, Touro faculty are on hard money, making engagement with the health department less of a barrier for them.

- Given the timing of the interviews, many participants expressed concerns regarding the anticipated challenges posed by the new presidential administration and the federal government's policies. However, the general sentiment was that the timing of this partnership work is perfect because public health needs to come together to continue the important work to protect and promote the health of communities

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this environmental scan, PHF has developed the following recommendations to consider as potential next steps as the Alameda County Public Health Department continues to explore, strengthen, and formalize AHD partnerships:

1. Identify no more than three priorities (e.g., formalizing the internship process, conducting research on a specific topic, providing continuing education opportunities for staff) to focus on and consider the academic institution which best aligns with each priority.
2. Once the health department has set its priorities, meet with aligned academic institutions to develop shared goals, explore key opportunities, and identify areas for growth within the AHD partnership.
3. Start small by pilot testing new relationships or initiatives, avoiding large-scale implementation at first. Move slowly and steadily, ensuring the process starts small rather than full-scale at the beginning.
4. Formalize successful existing partnerships that are aligned with the health department's priorities. Explore options for formal written agreements with and without full MOUs (i.e., UC Berkley did not express interest in an MOU).
5. Conduct annual assessments of the AHD partnership with each academic institution, agreeing on measures of success to evaluate progress.
6. Create a dedicated team within the health department to engage with academic institutions, ensuring it includes staff with contracting expertise to navigate bureaucratic hurdles. It is essential to identify staff who are both genuinely interested in this work and have the authority to make decisions within the agency to prevent unnecessary delays. While leadership buy-in is important, it is equally critical to have engaged staff who will actively manage and advance the partnership efforts.
7. To better understand existing partnerships between academic institutions and health departments, request Touro University's MOU with Solano County and explore the partnership between UC Berkeley and Contra Costa County to understand which aspects could be adopted.
8. Identify if a formal student pipeline is a priority for the health department, and if so, focus on Cal State East Bay as a primary partner. Their diverse student body and alignment with the Alameda County community make them a strong candidate for this effort. This could also help address workforce diversity and fill positions with students from underserved populations.