

Training a new generation of health professionals: The Advocates in Global Health Program at Dalhousie University

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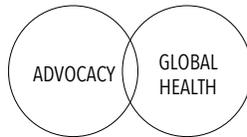


INTRODUCTION:

The Global Health Office at Dalhousie University developed the **Advocates in Global Health Program** with the aim to provide students with a holistic understanding of key issues in global health. This *extra-curricular* program is unique in its goal to promote interprofessional and student-faculty collaboration to allow learners to develop critical analysis of global health issues. The **Advocates in Global Health Program** is targeted to all students within the Faculties of Medicine, Health Professions, and Dentistry at Dalhousie University.

OBJECTIVE:

The objective of the program is to build knowledge and skills in two intersecting areas:



ADVOCACY:

Advocacy is defined as self-initiated, evidence-based, strategic action that blends science, ethics and politics¹. Through advocacy, health professionals can help transform systems and improve the environments and policies which shape their patients' behaviours and choices, and ultimately their health¹.

Most health professional accreditation bodies, including Medicine, Nursing, Occupational Therapy, and Physiotherapy, follow curricular frameworks that outline specific competencies in Advocacy^{2,3,4,5}. For example, the CanMEDS framework of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada identifies and describes seven roles that lead to optimal health and health care outcomes, including the role of a *Health Advocate*. Health advocates will responsibly use their expertise and influence to advance the health and wellbeing of individual, patients, communities, and populations².

GLOBAL HEALTH:

One definition of Global Health is as an area for study, research, and practice that prioritizes improving health and achieving equity in health for all people worldwide, with an emphasis on transnational health issues, determinants, and solutions, and promotion of interdisciplinary collaboration⁶.

It has been shown that global health education provides a positive learning experience that allows students to think laterally about health equity, and "fosters knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours which affirm the value of diversity and social justice"⁷. Thus, to meet the needs of health professional students and to remain relevant to the needs of society, their breadth of knowledge should include Global Health with a focus on the determinants of health and critical social analysis in conjunction with a foundation of biomedical training⁸.

Throughout the **Advocates in Global Health Program**, economic, societal, and political causes of health inequity will be considered and studied. Global Health Advocates will be empowered to make change in their communities, and will be given a greater chance for exploration into social responsibility, cross-cultural understanding, and population health.

OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM:

DEVELOPMENT:

The development of the program occurred as a response to flourishing student involvement in a broad array of global health initiatives. The pilot project was launched in January of 2012. Initially, all materials including criteria, learning competencies, and guidelines were posted on an online BBLearn website and student participation was largely self-directed.

In September 2012, the program was reformatted to include:

- Formal Curriculum, *Skill Building Sessions*
- Program Faculty
- A comprehensive handbook
- An updated BBLearn site
- Streamlined program criteria to reflect *Global Health Competencies**

*The growth of Global Health has encouraged the development of Competencies⁹ that recognize the variety of skill sets required to gain a holistic understanding of local and international health disparities and health systems. The Global Health Office uses these competencies as a framework for the **Advocates in Global Health Program**.

These include:

- Globalization of Health and Healthcare
- Social, Cultural, and Economic Determinants of Health
- Population, Resources, and Environment
- Healthcare in Low-Resource Settings
- Human Rights in Global Health
- Understanding the Global Burden of Disease
- Health Implications of Travel, Migration, and Displacement
- Practical Skills and Competencies in Global Health

Upon completion, students receive a letter and certificate of completion from the Global Health Office.

PROGRAM CRITERIA:

Participants complete required modules over two years. The program incorporates a continuum of learning in three key areas: Knowledge, Professional development, and Public engagement.



The Global Health Office along with faculty lead *Skill Building Sessions*, workshops for students to grasp key Global Health issues, and demonstrate critical evaluation of information and literature.

Students are also required to complete a portfolio at the end of their program. The portfolio is intended to be an open-ended means to translate learned competencies into a reflective presentation, and provide insight into their career as a future health professional.

EVALUATION:

In the summer of 2013 the program evaluation team will conduct a thorough evaluation of the **Advocates in Global Health Program**, using a mixed-methods approach.

The first cohort of students completed the program in April 2013, and have all conducted pre- and post-program assessments concerning knowledge and skills in Global Health, which will allow the evaluation team to quantitatively measure the degree of change in participating students' knowledge and skills of Global Health advocacy. Open-ended interviews will also be conducted with graduating students to qualitatively assess students' experiences of the program, and determine whether the program is effectively meeting its short-term goals. Finally, the team will utilize a logic model to assess the inputs, activities, outputs, and short, medium and long-term outcomes of the program. Upon completion of the evaluation process, the program staff will then revisit the program curriculum to ensure the results align with the intended objectives.

CONCLUSION:

In response to the growing needs of health professional students and global health systems, the Global Health Office at Dalhousie University designed the extra-curricular **Advocates in Global Health Program** to bolster student skills in Advocacy and Global Health. Through inter-professional collaboration and completion of required modules students gain an understanding of the interconnectedness of health policy and access, the medical physiology of health, and the social causes and consequences of health inequity. The **Advocates in Global Health Program** is an innovative approach to empowering health professional students and creating future leaders in Global Health.

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