



School of Public Health ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan Report

Overview

The School of Public Health has undertaken many steps to uphold its commitment to ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan. Critical systems changes within the School of Public Health include updating course curricula to include more Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) content and to address the unique health challenges Indigenous people in Canada face due to the harmful impacts of colonization. The School's faculty are engaged in collaborative research with Indigenous communities, fostering vital partnerships with Indigenous organizations and communities. There also has been a concerted effort to recruit and retain more Indigenous students.

Critical Systems Changes

A major shift over the recent years has been the change to Public Health curricula to meaningfully address Indigenous health issues and Indigenous perspectives to various aspects of health, wellbeing and public health practice. This shift has preceded, but was buttressed by the release of version 2 of the "Core Competencies for Public Health in Canada" in September 2025, which includes respecting Indigenous rights and uplifting Indigenous ways of knowing and doing across various core competency domains, particularly, the "Health Equity and Social Justice" domain.

The inclusion of Indigenous health issues, Indigenous perspectives, and Indigenous rights within curricula spans several core and elective courses. Curricula for the "Foundations of Public Health" course was revised in 2024 to: address various areas of racial inequities in health including the stigma and stereotyping Indigenous people face in the healthcare system, Indigenous community-based approaches to health and wellness, and Canadian policy responses that address the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action. In the courses focused on Health Promotion, Program Planning and Evaluation, students develop applied projects addressing Indigenous health priorities. The course integrates key concepts, including cultural safety, community engagement, and Indigenization, and provides students with hands-on experience in designing interventions that are responsive to Indigenous contexts. Principles of community engagement and relational capacity are emphasized in the "Leadership in Public Health" course, as these are central to public health practice in Canada. The "Health Policy and Politics Course" also addresses advancing Truth and Reconciliation as a responsibility of public health practitioners. The "Systems in Public Health" course introduces students to unique Indigenous public health systems, which orients them to governance and decision-making processes in Indigenous communities. The School has also developed an elective course "Social Justice in Public Health," which is in the process of being regularized that aligns with the new core competency domain "Health Equity and Social Justice," which has significant content that amplifies Indigenous perspectives of health and wellbeing, and addresses the commitments to address the Truth and Reconciliation Calls for Action, as well as the National Inquiry for Missing and Murdered Women and Girls Calls for Justice.

The School of Public Health has been very active in establishing important research partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations that aim to improve the health and wellness of Indigenous people in Canada and globally. The Indigenous saying, "Nothing about us without us," is taken to heart and faculty are actively working on ensuring they work collaboratively *with* Indigenous communities on research rather than doing research *on* Indigenous people. Several faculty, including Drs. Barb Fornssler, Thilina Bandara and Hassan Vatanparast (joint



faculty member with Pharmacy and Nutrition), are involved with the Network Environments for Indigenous Health Research (NEIHR) network in Saskatchewan, contributing to efforts to strengthen Indigenous-led research capacity, partnerships, and knowledge mobilization across the province. The School of Public Health also participated in six co-led projects through Global Water Futures, the world's largest university-led freshwater research program, through which they collaborated with Indigenous partners from across Canada to address urgent and growing water quality issues for Indigenous communities. A number of faculty have research funded by CIHR, SSHRC, SHRF and other grants that focuses on research with Indigenous communities on different aspects of health and wellness across the life course including reproductive and maternal health, early childhood and youth health, and health among older adults. On an international level, Dr. Hassan Vantanparast has led international community-based research with Indigenous peoples in Malaysia and Guatemala, applying shared principles of cultural respect and contextually appropriate health promotion.

The School of Public Health is expanding its efforts to attract more Indigenous students through support for Indigenous student awards and Indigenous student entrance scholarships. There is a challenge in recruitment due to the lack of undergraduate program in Public Health, but the School is taking creative steps to interest prospective Indigenous students, such as participating in SK-NEIHR initiatives and it has exploring models used by other Schools, Colleges and at other institutions. Additionally, Brigham Young University-Hawaii has expressed interest in exploring a partnership related to Indigenous Hawaiian student engagement, and the School is in the process of exploring this potential partnership.

Language Shifts, Policy Evolution, Cultural Transformation

Within the course curricula in the School of Public Health, professors are making concerted efforts to decolonize and Indigenize the content where possible, cultivating classroom spaces in which Indigenous students can feel respected and understood, as part of the shared commitment to safety. In courses there is a concerted effort to represent Indigenous authors and perspectives in 10% of the, some faculty are taking this further. For example, Dr. Holly McKenzie, who teaches "Social Justice in Public Health", "Introduction to Qualitative Methods in Public Health" and "Advanced Qualitative Methods in Public Health" has ensured that a minimum of 15% of the content amplifies Indigenous perspectives. There is also a noted effort to decolonize the language about Indigenous health and wellness in Public Health courses. Faculty and students alike are engaged in training and activities that centre concepts such as Reconciliation in Action, Trauma-Informed Care, and Harm Reduction.

How the 7 Commitments are Embodied

Many of the faculty are engaged in research that embodies the commitment to wellness. Some faculty members' research projects are grounded in Indigenous ceremony and land-based practices. These faculty are embracing and participating in these Indigenous ways of knowing and doing which supports the wellness of Indigenous students and community research partners.

The School of Public Health uphold the commitment to stewardship in various ways as faculty who are not Indigenous to Turtle Island, but work alongside Indigenous peoples of these lands and internationally. Many of



the Public Health courses bring in Indigenous guest speakers or allies with hands-on experience working with Indigenous communities. Dr. Holly McKenzie is developing a new graduate-level Reproductive Justice and Public Health certificate program guided by an advisory of six First Nations and Métis women community members and leaders; this certificate development has included two days of in-person culturally grounded curriculum development activities, as well as several half-day virtual meetings to continue this development work. This program will foreground Indigenous perspectives and experiences about reproductive justice. Dr. Barb Fornssler's current program of substance use research is guided by a First Nation and Métis Advisory Council, established to support ethical decision-making, accountability to community priorities, and meaningful integration of perspectives across research design, implementation, and knowledge mobilization. Dr. Amanda Froehlich Chow's research in rural and remote communities centres on Indigenous-led approaches to sexual health education and physical literacy.

Regarding the commitment to representation, faculty from the School of Public Health are working with Indigenous community members and leaders to ensure representation within curricula, both through content authored by Indigenous scholars and community members and leaders, and through their presence in the classroom through invited guest lectures. Guest lecturers include: Dr. Cassandra Opikokew Wajuntah (Cree), Elder Harvey Thunderchild (Cree), Nicole White with Moontime Connections (Métis), an Sarah Smokeyday, former Board Chair with the Saskatoon Mothers' Centre (Anishinaabe), Daniel Hearn with Hard Knox Talks (Métis), and Dr. Sharon Acoose with First Nations University (Saulteaux).

Regarding the commitment to creation, the course "Interdisciplinary Public Health Practice" that Master of Public Health students take after they complete their practicums, includes student group projects that simulates real-world public health practices (including relationship-building with Indigenous organizations as partners and co-leaders on research projects). Through doing so, students gain skills integral to building and sustaining relationships with Indigenous partners, which will foster future partnerships between public health professionals and Indigenous organizations and communities in research and beyond. The graduate-level Reproductive Justice and Public Health certificate program discussed above is another example of creation as it is being co-created with Indigenous community members and leaders, and culturally-grounded curriculum development activities.

Much of the research undertaken by School of Public Health faculty also embodies the commitment to creation. For example, Dr. Amanda Froehlich Chow's CIHR- and SickKids-funded project *Nature's Way—Our Way* was co-developed with rural Indigenous partners to expand culturally grounded physical literacy programming. Implemented across diverse settings, the project supported the creation of community-informed resources, including Nature's Way Activity Cards, educator wellness sessions, and land-based cultural gatherings, while identifying limitations in applying Western evaluation frameworks within Indigenous contexts. Creation is also embodied in Dr. Thilina Bandara's research to improve HPV immunization, which is being done in partnership with Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation; the work has resulted in the conversations to leverage digital technologies to improve communication regarding HPV-related facts and preventative programming.

Program and Policy Highlights

In the Master of Public Health practicum program, coordinated by faculty member Dr. Claudia Madampage, students are encouraged to undertake practicums that partner with local and regional Indigenous organizations, or organization that work with Indigenous people and communities. Some of the participating organizations have



included All Nations Hope Network, Prairie Harm Reduction (PHR), Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority (NITHA), Métis Nation–Saskatchewan (MNS), Wellness Wheel Medical Clinic, White Buffalo Youth Lodge and Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC). Prior to entering their practicum, students' preparation includes core curriculum that amplifies Indigenous perspectives and experiences discussed above, and the specific preparatory course for the practicum includes a variety of academic sessions and engagement with invited guest speakers. Through these academic sessions students learn how to seek Indigenous knowledge and respect commitments to Indigenous rights through specific and applicable library workshops and faculty lectures (examples: "Attending to equity in your practicum work" by Dr. Holly McKenzie, and "Culturally rooted and community-led wellness approaches" by Dr. Amanda Froehlich Chow, and "Cultural Diversity and Indigenous Engagement" with Cree Elder Harvey Thunderchild).

Indigenous Success Stories

First Nations and Métis communities consistently emphasize the importance of youth leadership and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge. In alignment with this, the School actively supports Indigenous students and involves them in leadership development opportunities. This demonstrates the School's commitment to supporting and recognizing Indigenous students. There have been a number of Indigenous graduates in recent years, including some who have gone on to pursue doctoral studies. For example, MPH alum Nathan Oakes is now pursuing his PhD in Community and Population Health Sciences and MPH alum Thomas McBride is a PhD candidate in the School of Public Health.

Recommendations and plans moving into years 5-7

Faculty from the School of Public Health will continue to build relationships with Indigenous communities and partner organizations to strengthen research and curriculum development. They will further integrate and update Indigenous content in their course syllabi, addressing pernicious healthcare and health policy issues faced by Indigenous people in Canada, upholding Indigenous rights, and amplifying Indigenous approaches to policy, programming, and care. The School of Public Health recognizes Indigenization as an ongoing commitment, and that faculty members approach this work through diverse strategies. The variety of approaches and stories is a strength and reflects the complexity of public health. Many of the faculty have research partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations that will continue and grow into the future, fostering more Indigenous community-engaged research.

Looking to the future, the faculty from the School of Public Health have identified a number of important areas of focus regarding their work on *ohpahotân* | *oohpaahotaan*. These include continuing to build relationships with external universities and other partners to advance Indigenization and reconciliation; continuing ongoing work to build community-engagement opportunities for students, staff and faculty; strengthening and further building community relationships, and addressing the calls for action and justice through School processes; developing opportunities for community leaders to facilitate cultural and community activities with students; increasing education and awareness among faculty; and developing a formal strategy and commitment that addresses student recruitment, retention, and safety, Indigenous faculty recruitment and retention. The School of Public Health has a strong basis from which to continue supporting *ohpahotân* | *oohpaahotaan* and its faculty will continue to be leaders in decolonizing and Indigenous public health education in Canada.



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Conclusion

Over the last five years, the School of Public Health has made great strides in its efforts to embody the commitments of *ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan*. These include revising course curricula to increase representation of Indigenous peoples, perspectives and experiences, and to address the commitments to Truth and Reconciliation. Faculty are engaged in research working alongside Indigenous communities and organizations, and that centre Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. There are programs in development with Indigenous community partners, and that centre Indigenous perspectives and approaches. Faculty and students are engaged in training that promotes better understanding of Indigenous realities and approaches to health and wellness. The faculty have identified future directions for the School's commitments of *ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan*.