

GONE VIRAL: PUBLIC HEALTH IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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This course examines the rapidly evolving social, cultural, behavioral, political, and socioeconomic dimensions of public health in community, national, regional, and global contexts. We consider how health as well as the generation of knowledge about health are being continually re-shaped by factors such as age, gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, social class, geography, and interactions within physical and digital environments. We learn how to analyze dynamic public health problems and identify agile solutions by casting light on individual risk factors as well as larger structural forces. We consider how social media enables the rapid proliferation of hotly contested messages and information about the rights of the individual versus the welfare of the public. Finally, we critically examine the ways in which our understandings of health and well-being perpetually shape, and are shaped by, health care systems in flux, the mediation of our own values, and our changing assumptions about the world. "Gone Viral: Public Health in a Global Context" is an exploration of the spread of pathogens and other health threats as well as the spread of ideas and knowledge about them via social media and other platforms.

The course is offered twice during the NextGen Leadership Institute (NGLI); students may choose to register for either Session I or Session II. The course is structured around nine (9) in-person sessions that meet during a three-week period. The format combines interactive lectures with discussion-based seminars. The course introduces students to fundamental concepts and issues in public health. Students read selected excerpts from public health textbooks, public health journals, and popular magazines. Short videos, social media content, and documentary films supplement the readings, providing a diversified basis for lively collegial debate. Concurrent with class sessions, students also engage in basic research outside of the classroom by conducting rapid ethnographic assessment. Research methods include observational exercises in public spaces, recruitment of and informal interviews with respondents, small group assignments within walking distance of campus, and participant-observation in online spaces where public health ideas are evinced and negotiated.

The course has six learning objectives:

1. Introduce definitions of disease, illness, and well-being from various perspectives.
2. Introduce students to a population perspective on health and disease.
3. Define and describe the social determinants of health and explain how they differ from other (biological) determinants of health.
4. Introduce the field of public health and its various dimensions.
5. Encourage debates on individual versus societal rights related to the promotion of health and prevention of disease.
6. Deepen students' understandings of the complex factors that shape health issues, and the response of government, institutions, and policies to those issues.

The structure of the course can be thought of as a play in three acts. In Act I (Week 1: class sessions 1, 2, and 3), the professor sets the stage by introducing fundamental concepts, methods, theories, and measurements widely used in public health. During the first week, students also receive their research assignments, refine their topic, and accompany the professor on a Manhattan fieldtrip that ignites students' confidence, enthusiasm, and competence around ethnographic data collection. Act II (Week 2: class sessions 4, 5, and 6) advances students' knowledge of public health through semi-structured discussions of public health issues, confronting essential tensions that suffuse collective conceptions of health. During the second week, students begin to incorporate insights they derive from analysis of digitally mediated knowledge, drawing on social media and other online discursive health-related environments. Act III (Week 3: class sessions 7, 8, and 9) sets the stage for a tentative resolution of competing ideas about public health in various contexts. Rather than punctuating the course with decisive conclusions, the final class sessions provide a space in which to raise questions that will sustain students' interest in public health for years to come. The course culminates in brief in-class presentations that allow students to demonstrate mastery of course materials by using public health frameworks to present findings from the field-based research assignments.