

# Practicum in Public Health Field Research/South Africa

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## PHS 5821

**Instructor:** Christopher J. Colvin, PhD in Sociocultural Anthropology (University of Virginia), MPH in Epidemiology (University of Cape Town)

Office: 7 Alfred St, Observatory, Cape Town

Phone: +27-21-447-7605

Email: [cjc5r@virginia.edu](mailto:cjc5r@virginia.edu)

Class Times: See weekly schedule

Office Hours: By appointment

## Course Description

The aim of this course is to provide students a mentored experience in the practice of public health research. It aims to fill a gap in the research training process for many students. On the one hand, while students may take research methods courses on Grounds that include some limited practical/experiential component, there is little opportunity in this setting for learning and refining a range of methods skills and for developing methodological and ethical insight and problem solving in a facilitated fashion. On the other hand, opportunities for substantive undergraduate and even graduate research projects can be scarce given the time, training, resources, and institutional hurdles to achieving even the most basic research initiatives. This program is designed to help bridge this gap by offering a practical introduction to public health research by mentoring students as they develop and execute research projects in community settings in Cape Town.

This course will be closely integrated with PHS 5820 (Introduction to Health Research Methods). The field methods course will help to initiate and guide the work done in the field research projects for this course and the field research experience will, in turn, provide much of the experiential “raw material” about ethical and methodological challenges that we will then reflect on and process in the methods course.

## Course Objectives

This course will enable students to:

- Apply key concepts and theories in qualitative and quantitative public health research to study design, data collection, analysis, report writing, and dissemination;
- Carry out basic field research skills in:

- negotiating community access,
- recruiting participants and securing individual informed consent,
- data collection and management,
- managing project logistics, resources and timelines,
- data analysis, and;
- research report write-up and dissemination
- Identify ethical and methodological challenges and develop ways of addressing these in the course of a research project.

## Structure of the Research Process

The research projects that students will be engaged in for this course will be related to the ongoing research program of the program director, Christopher J. Colvin, a medical anthropologist and epidemiologist working in Cape Town. The particular set of research topics available from year to year will therefore change. Students will begin with a set of research contacts and ideas from this broader research program but will then develop their own projects in groups during the program.

Projects are likely to emphasize qualitative methods (including mapping, survey or network analysis methods) and are likely to take place in community and NGO contexts rather than health facilities (given the ethical and institutional barriers to accessing health facility sites for short-term projects). Dr. Colvin's research interests include HIV/AIDS and masculinity, community health workers, health politics and activism, and maternal and child health interventions. He is also involved in a range of projects integrating qualitative and quantitative methods in public health research.

Possible projects could include:

- Working with members of a local activist NGO to collect qualitative and quantitative data on sanitation and security issues in an informal settlement
- Researching local understandings of "HIV/AIDS denialism" and examining the link between local politics, local forms of healing practice, and trust in medical science.
- Following members of a local support group for men with HIV as they embrace anti-retroviral treatment and attempt to understand what it means for them that HIV is no longer an acute and fatal illness but rather a chronic, lifelong condition.
- Interviewing volunteer workers in health programs from both South Africa and abroad to better understand their motivations, intentions and goals in performing volunteer work.
- Mapping and assessing the functionality of the clinic health committees in the Cape Town Metro region.

Students will work in groups of between 4 and 5 people on a particular project in order to both encourage reflection, mutual learning and collective problem solving as well as increase safety while in the field. MPH or other graduate students in the program (enrolled in PHS 8821) will be part of each group and will be required to participate in the same research activities as undergraduates. They will also, however, serve an additional coordinating and mentoring function for the undergraduate students

in the group. When the instructor is not with the students in the field, they will also serve as the liaison point for the instructor and local research participants and will be responsible for overseeing the group.

## **Assignments**

All of the written work for the research projects will be assessed under the course that is paired with this one (PHS 5820 Introduction to Health Research Methods). The grade for this course will consist primarily of an assessment of level of participation during the practicum.

Instead of a final exam, a 10-page reflection paper reviewing their experience in the field will be due 2 weeks after the end of the program.

## **Readings**

N/A