

Charting the Path: Impact of the National Environmental Public Health Internship Program on Educational and Career Choices

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Abstract The National Environmental Public Health Internship Program (NEPHIP) addresses critical workforce needs in environmental public health by bridging academic studies with practical experience. This study evaluated NEPHIP's impact on former interns from 2015 to 2021 using a questionnaire, revealing positive effects on career paths and professional skills. From a total of 138 interns, we achieved a 29% response rate; the results demonstrate that NEPHIP significantly influenced their career trajectories and skill development. Despite limitations such as outdated contact information and a limited response rate for the questionnaire, NEPHIP's contribution to professional development is evident in the results. Outcome data suggest that NEPHIP influenced the career trajectories of interns, with 98% ranking their experiences as positive and the majority pursuing careers in environmental public health. Intern reflections revealed the program's diverse benefits—from gaining unique professional insights to beneficial mentorships—that illuminate NEPHIP's role in shaping future environmental public health professionals.

Keywords: NEPHIP, internships, workforce development, environmental public health

Introduction

The environmental public health workforce is essential for community well-being, encompassing vital areas such as food and water safety, disease control, environmental risk management, and emergency response (Gerding et al., 2019). Recent reductions in personnel and resources, however, threaten to compromise the quality of these essential services (Cunningham et al., 2024).

To address this challenge, bridging the gap between academic studies and practical experience is crucial. Internship programs such as the National Environmental Pub-

lic Health Internship Program (NEPHIP) effectively combine theoretical knowledge with real-world applications, enhancing students' professional readiness (Ryan & Hall, 2022). NEPHIP, a collaboration between the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH), offers a 400-hr paid internship for students enrolled in programs accredited through the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC). Interns work with state, tribal, local, and territorial (STLT)

environmental public health agencies, gaining experience through independent projects, field activities, academic credits, and mentorship from experienced professionals. From 2015 to 2021, NEPHIP supported 144 interns, providing them with insights into governmental public health operations and fostering valuable industry connections.

NEPHIP not only supports career development but also broadens the diversity of the environmental public health workforce. By including students from marginalized backgrounds, the program integrates diverse perspectives into public health solutions, promoting health equity (Hernandez et al., 2014).

Impact of Different Internship Modes

The mode of internship delivery has a strong effect on learning outcomes. Traditional in-person internships offer rich, hands-on experiences, but the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shift to remote formats (Zamora et al., 2022). While remote internships present challenges, hybrid models combining in-person and virtual components have shown promise, particularly for marginalized pre-health undergraduates (McCleary-Gaddy et al., 2022). These hybrid models leverage the strength of both approaches, enhancing the learning experience and adapting to the evolving educational landscape.

Enhanced Skill Set Through NEPHIP

Internships such as NEPHIP are pivotal in developing essential professional skills, including skills in communication, data analysis, critical thinking, and project management. Internships also promote cultural awareness, leadership, and adaptability, thereby better preparing students for diverse professional environments and future career challenges (Hu et al., 2016; Levy et al., 2015). As demonstrated by programs such as the one at the University of Iowa College of Public Health, integrating these skills with reflective practices prepares students for real-world situations and helps define their post-academic goals (Crowell, 2018).

Methods

We designed a questionnaire to examine the influence of NEPHIP on the academic and professional trajectories of former interns in environmental public health. The questionnaire was distributed to individuals who were NEPHIP interns between 2015 and 2021. To maximize reach, the questionnaire link was sent directly to 138 former interns using their available contact information and shared with 15 university program directors to share among their alumni.

In total, 45 responses were received, yielding an approximate 29% response rate. As an incentive, we offered via a random drawing free NEHA memberships and conference registration for the NEHA Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition.

Questionnaire Measures

The questionnaire was developed to evaluate changes in knowledge and skills, career decisions, and professional development resulting from the internship experience. The questionnaire included multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions. Multiple-choice questions predominantly were used to gather quantifiable data. These included:

- internship details (e.g., year, academic level, location),
- educational pursuits post-internship,
- employment status and sector,
- ratings of the internship's impact on various aspects of skill and career development, and
- demographic information.

Open-ended questions collected qualitative information. These questions allowed

respondents to provide detailed insights on topics such as:

- description of how the internship mode (virtual, in-person, hybrid) impacted their experience,
- explanation of how NEPHIP influenced their work-related decisions or career path,
- recommendations for improving the NEPHIP program, and
- additional comments about their NEPHIP experience.

Analyses

A combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses was conducted. Descriptive statistics were conducted for multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions to calculate frequencies, percentages, and means as appropriate. To assess if there were differences between in-person and virtual internship experiences, multiple Mann–Whitney U tests were used. This analysis focused on specific questions that measured:

- overall learning experience,
- relevance of internship content to current career,
- acquisition of job-relevant knowledge and skills, and
- development of specific competencies.

For the last point related to specific competencies, outcomes were also contrasted between interns who pursued careers in environmental public health and interns who chose other paths. Further, thematic analysis was conducted with open-ended question responses to identify recurring themes and patterns in responses about the internship's impact on career decisions, recommendations for improvement, and overall experiences.

Results

The following results integrate the quantitative and qualitative findings from the questionnaire to provide a comprehensive understanding of NEPHIP's impact on career choices.

Respondent Demographics

Of the 45 responses, there was representation from each year of the program, with the most respondents having participated in NEPHIP in 2017 (Figure 1). At the time of their internship, most respondents reported being an undergraduate student (69%): 4% were sophomores, 38% were juniors, and 27% were seniors. One person reported they

were getting their second bachelor's degree at the time of their NEPHIP experience.

The geographic locations in which respondents completed their NEPHIP internships covered all U.S. regions (i.e., the West, Southwest, Midwest, Southeast, and Northeast). Figure 2 shows the geographic representation of the states where the host sites were located. Approximately 62% of respondents stated that they did their internship with a local agency or department, whereas 36% did their internship with a state agency or department.

Mode of Internship

Most (76%) of the respondents had in-person internships, 22% had a virtual internship, and one person (2%) reported their internship was hybrid. Of the in-person or hybrid internships, 76% reported they had to relocate to complete their internship.

Learning Experience

In terms of preparing them for a career, respondents rated their NEPHIP learning experience using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = poor to 5 = excellent). Most respondents reported their learning experience as excellent (62%) or good (36%). One respondent (2%) rated their learning experience as average, and no one rated it as below average or poor (Figure 3).

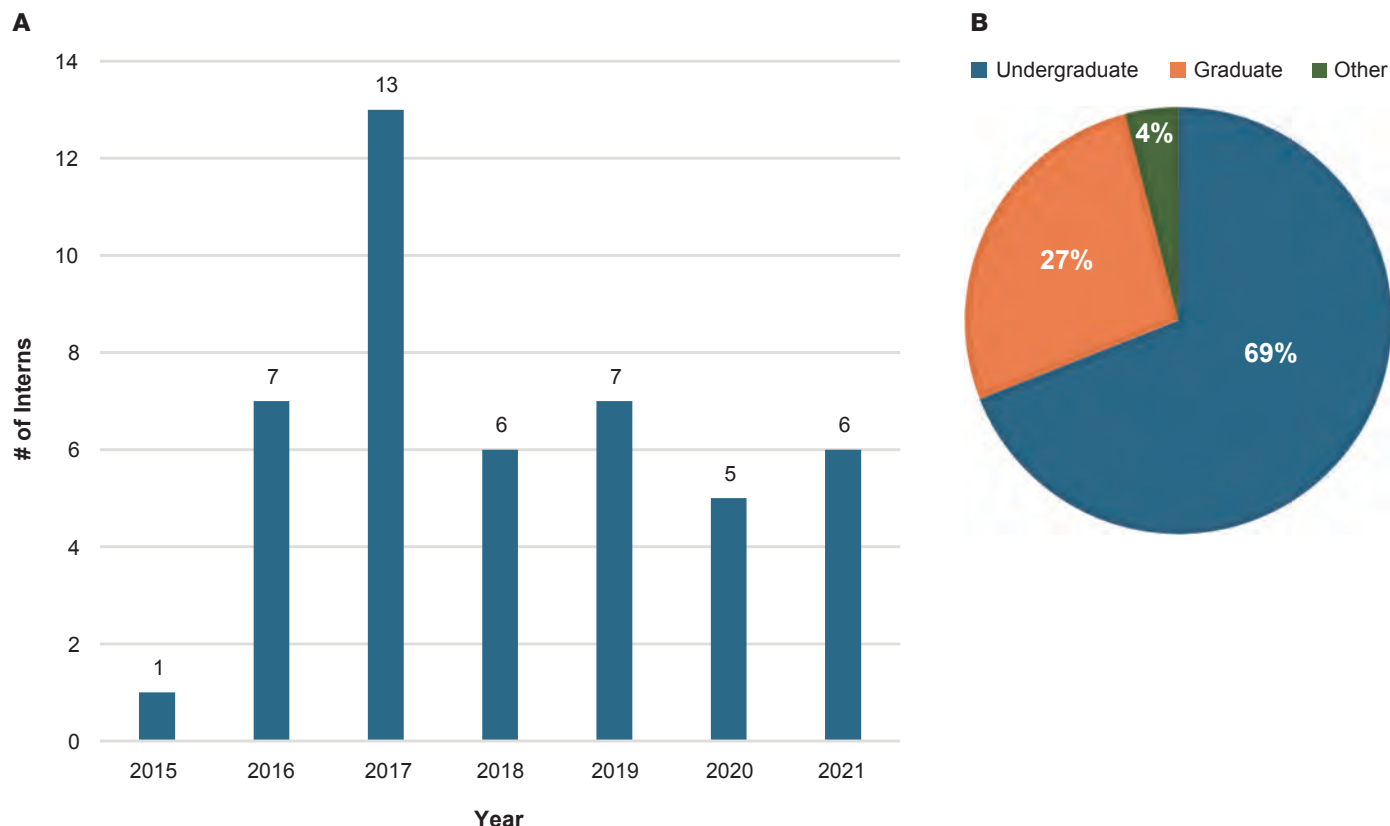
Career Skills Gained During Internship

Respondents who joined the workforce (regardless of whether they pursued careers in environmental public health or not) after participating in the program indicated that they continued to apply skills and knowledge from their internships. The most frequently used skills included interpersonal skills in a professional context, data collection and analysis, and critical thinking (Table 1).

Further, the questionnaire used two questions with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal) to assess NEPHIP's relevance to subsequent employment of participants (Figure 4). Regarding how closely their position related to what was learned during the internship, 31% of respondents said it related "a great deal," 28% said "very much," and 22% said "somewhat," indicating a strong alignment for most participants. In terms of acquiring knowledge and skills needed for their

FIGURE 1

Intern Responses for A) Year of Participation in the National Environmental Public Health Internship Program and B) College Level at Time of Internship



position, 25% said it helped “a great deal,” 38% said “very much,” and 22% said “some-what.” Only a small percentage for both questions felt the internship was not at all related or helpful.

Post-NEPHIP Education and Career Outcomes

The NEPHIP experience influenced the educational pursuits and career trajectories of participants, as evidenced by their post-internship choices in both academia and the workforce.

Educational Pursuits

62% ($n = 28$) of respondents continued their education after NEPHIP.

- 35% pursued a master’s degree in environmental public health.
- 29% pursued a master’s in public health.
- 11% advanced to doctoral studies.

- 25% pursued a master’s degree in other fields (e.g., occupational safety, nursing, policy).

Career Outcomes

- 58% entered environmental public health careers.
- 16% pursued other public health positions.
- 13% chose related fields (e.g., industrial hygiene, toxicology).
- 4% entered non-public health careers.
- 9% did not enter the workforce.

Employment in Environmental Public Health

In total, 74% of respondents entered environmental health or public health careers. Of these respondents:

- 70% credited NEPHIP for direct post-graduation employment.
- 24% were employed by their internship host sites.
- 58% work or have worked in STLT agencies.

Experience Level in Environmental Public Health or Another Public Health Field

- 31% have 1–2 years.
- 56% have 3–5 years.
- <10% have 6–9 years.

Internship Experience and Effect on Career

Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal), the questionnaire asked respondents about the extent to which they have maintained professional connections made during their NEPHIP internship. Nearly one half (45%) reported keeping in touch “a little” with their internship connections. Nearly one quarter (24%) maintained connections “a moderate amount,” whereas 15% stayed in touch “a great deal.” Another 15% of respondents reported not maintaining any professional connections at all.

FIGURE 2

Geographic Distribution of Interns Participating in the National Environmental Public Health Internship Program in 2015–2021 ($n = 45$)

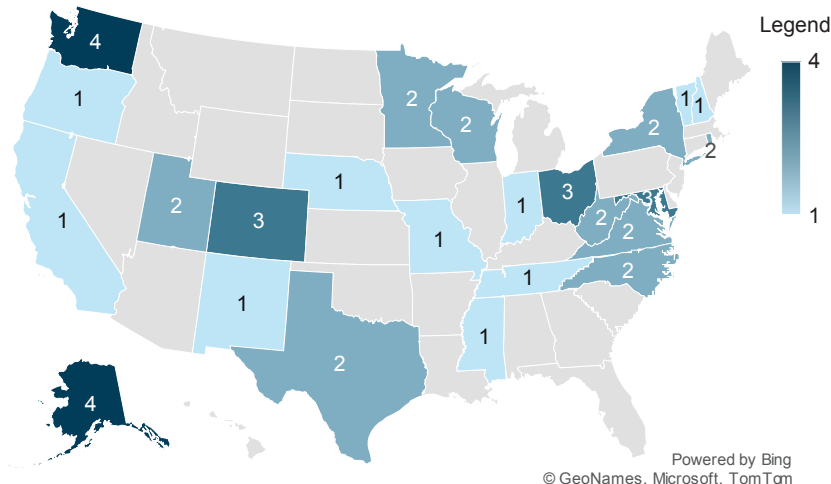
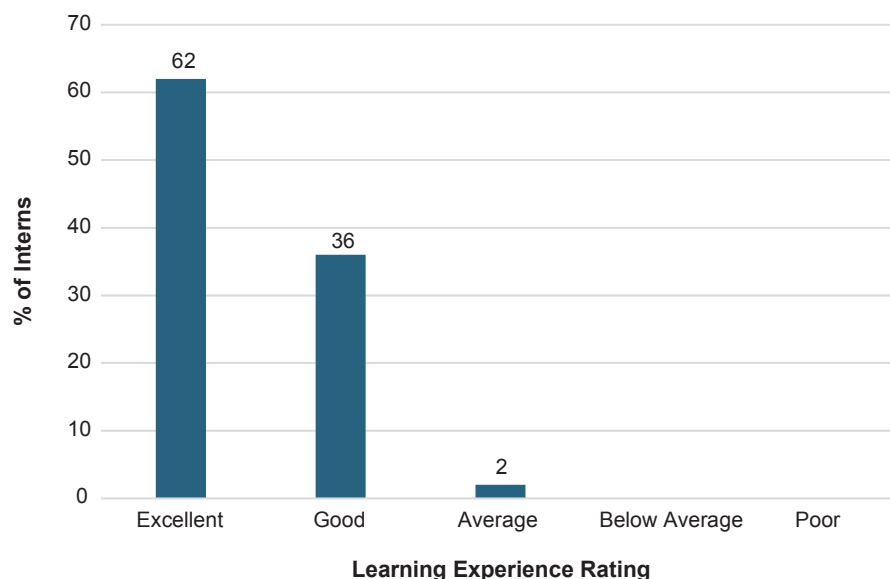


FIGURE 3

Quality of Learning Experience Indicated by Interns Participating in the National Environmental Public Health Internship Program in 2015–2021 ($n = 45$)



Internship Experience and Effect on Skill Development and Career Decision

Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = a little to 5 = a great deal), respondents were queried

about the extent their NEPHIP experience influenced various facets of their career decisions, skill acquisition, and professional development (Table 2). The results reveal

differences between interns who chose environmental public health careers and interns who pursued other paths. While both groups highly valued gaining real-world experience, with nearly all respondents rating this aspect positively, the participants who chose to pursue environmental public health careers generally reported higher percentages of positive responses across most skill development and career decision items. Differences emerged in areas such as clarifying career decisions, understanding company culture, and increasing motivation for professional growth. Both groups appreciated the experience for boosting their resumes and understanding workplace behaviors and communication styles.

Mann–Whitney U tests were performed on these items to compare the effect of internship experience on skill development and career decisions between interns who entered the environmental public health workforce ($n = 31$) and interns who pursued other career paths or did not enter the workforce ($n = 8$). Results indicated two items showed a significant difference between the two groups.

1. The extent the internship experience helped clarify the decision to pursue a career in environmental or public health was significantly higher for interns who entered the environmental public health workforce ($Mdn = 4$) than for interns who chose a different career or did not enter the workforce ($Mdn = 3$, $U = 31.5$, $z = -3.45$, $p = <.001$, $r = .55$).
2. The extent the internship experience helped with the understanding of their company's culture was significantly higher for interns who entered the environmental public health workforce ($Mdn = 4$) than for interns who chose a different career or did not enter the workforce ($Mdn = 2.5$, $U = 85$, $z = -2.73$, $p = .01$, $r = .44$).

Impact of Internship Modality

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to comment on the impact that the modality of their internship had on their overall experience, including what worked well and what was challenging. The majority of NEPHIP interns strongly preferred in-person internships, citing numerous advantages such as hands-on experience, teamwork, networking opportunities, and comprehensive exposure to various departments. One intern noted, "I was able to get

TABLE 1

Relevant Internship Skills and Knowledge (*n* = 38)

Skill or Knowledge	%
Communication	97
Interpersonal skills in a professional setting	76
Data collection and analysis	76
Critical thinking	71
Time management	68
Organization	63
Problem-solving	63
Project management	58
Presentations	58
Decision-making	58
Research	53
Prioritization	50
Networking	47
Diversity awareness	39
Public speaking	37
Leadership	34
Cultural intelligence	34
Remote work management	18

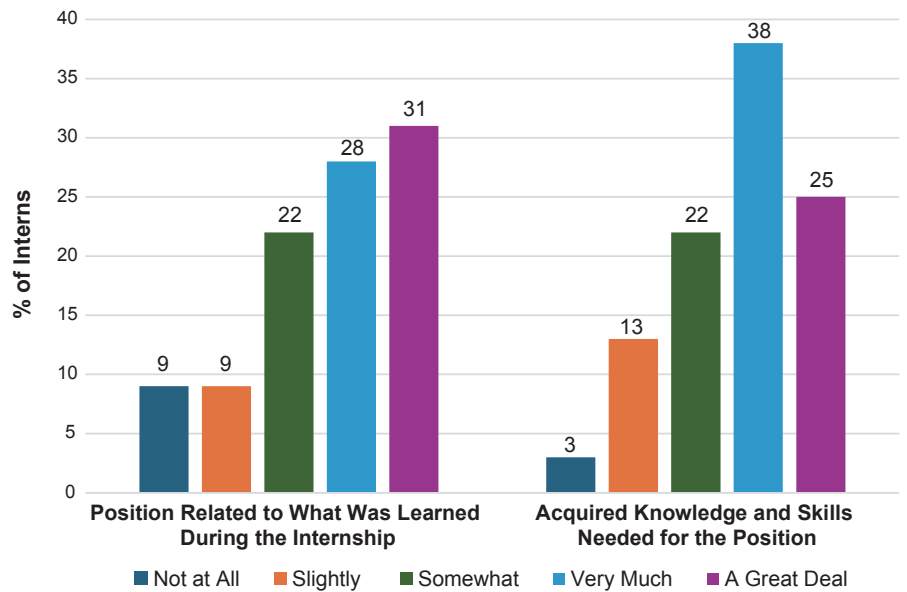
hands-on experience with environmental health in a variety of ways.” While virtual internships offered flexibility and a safeguard during the COVID-19 pandemic, they presented challenges in fieldwork and networking. As one participant mentioned, “It was challenging to feel like I was truly part of the team, especially because I was unable to do any work in the field since everything was virtual.” The hybrid internship provided a balance between online coursework and in-person training. The main challenges of in-person internships included relocation and transportation issues, with one intern stating, “The only challenge was relocating and affording housing.” Despite these challenges, most interns reported finding the in-person experience crucial for their learning and professional development.

Differences in Impact by Internship Modality

To investigate potential differences between in-person and virtual internship experi-

FIGURE 4

Preparation for Their First Professional Position Indicated by Interns Participating in the National Environmental Public Health Internship Program in 2015–2021 (*n* = 32)



ences, Mann–Whitney U tests were conducted to compare in-person and virtual internship experiences across several aspects. Results showed no significant differences between the two groups in overall learning experience ($U = 126$, $z = -1.45$, $p = .15$, $r = .22$); relevance of internship to initial job positions ($U = 61$, $z = .43$, $p = .67$, $r = .01$); or the extent to which internship activities provided necessary knowledge and skills ($U = 53.5$, $z = -.03$, $p = .98$, $r = .01$). Additionally, no significant differences were found across the skill development and career decision items (Table 2) by internship modality. These findings suggest that virtual internships provided comparable experiences to in-person internships across the measured dimensions.

Recommendations to Improve NEPHIP

Based on questionnaire feedback, even though most respondents had a positive experience with NEPHIP, the following areas were identified for potential enhancement:

- Enhance career support by providing job search guidance, showcasing internship experiences on resumes, and potentially offering job opportunities post-internship.

- Prioritize in-person experiences, when possible, as they were perceived as more valuable than virtual internships.
- Offer opportunities to explore emerging areas of environmental public health.
- Improve the matching process between interns and host sites, possibly through brief interviews to align interests.
- Provide more detailed information about internship plans and expectations in acceptance letters.
- Consider increasing financial support, particularly for high-cost living areas.
- Facilitate networking opportunities, such as free registration to relevant conferences.
- Assist with housing arrangements in internship locations.
- Ensure interns work on meaningful projects with tangible outcomes.

Overall Impact of NEPHIP

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to describe how their NEPHIP experience has influenced or affected their work-related decisions or career trajectory. NEPHIP had a significant positive impact on participant career paths and professional develop-

TABLE 2

Percentage of Interns Indicating That the National Environmental Public Health Internship Program Impacted Skill Development and Career Decisions Either Very Much or a Great Deal

Skill Development and Career Decision Item	Interns Who Chose an Environmental Public Health Career # (%)	Interns Who Chose Another Career Path # (%)
Gain real-world experience to apply to the work environment (<i>n</i> = 38)	31 (100)	6 (86)
Boost resume to improve employability (<i>n</i> = 39)	26 (84)	7 (87)
Help clarify decision to pursue a career in environmental health or public health (<i>n</i> = 36) *	28 (90)	3 (60)
Provide skills relevant to career goals (<i>n</i> = 39)	27 (87)	5 (63)
Help form a connection between coursework and how that applies to the field and workplace (<i>n</i> = 38)	27 (87)	6 (86)
Increase motivation for professional growth (<i>n</i> = 39)	28 (90)	5 (63)
Help to understand behaviors, attitudes, and communication styles within a work setting (<i>n</i> = 38)	26 (84)	6 (86)
Help to see the value of networking to establish professional career-related relationships (<i>n</i> = 37)	20 (67)	5 (63)
Identify personal strengths and weaknesses (<i>n</i> = 38)	22 (71)	3 (43)
Help to understand company culture (<i>n</i> = 35) *	23 (79)	2 (33)
Influence decision to pursue further academic studies in environmental health or public health topics (<i>n</i> = 35)	19 (69)	3 (50)
Help identify organizations with job opportunities (<i>n</i> = 38)	15 (48)	4 (57)
Enhance understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (<i>n</i> = 35)	16 (57)	2 (43)

* Denotes significant difference between groups based on Mann–Whitney U test.

ment in environmental and public health. Key themes that emerged include:

- **Career direction and confirmation:** Many interns reported that the experience solidified their career choices or opened new paths in environmental health. One intern noted, “The NEPHIP experience is what influenced me to work in the public environmental health field upon graduation. It was such an overwhelmingly positive experience that allowed me to experience first-hand the field of environmental health.”
- **Skill development and practical experience:** Interns gained valuable hands-on experience and skills applicable to their future careers. One intern stated, “NEPHIP

set me up for my entire career thus far. The relationships and hands-on experience set an amazing trajectory for me.”

- **Professional growth and confidence:** The internship provided a foundation for career advancement. As one participant noted, “NEPHIP was such an amazing experience. I never knew [it] would have such a direct impact on my life. The tools and experiences acquired established a strong foundation for my career growth, which allowed me to have the courage to take on this new senior-level position within my current agency.”
- **Expanded understanding of the field:** Interns gained a broader perspective on

environmental and public health. One intern stated, “The internship definitely broadened my knowledge scope on what can be done within public health, and it led me to pursue the master’s [degree] I have now.”

- **Networking and relationship building:** The program provided opportunities to build professional relationships.
- **Positive experience:** The program was overall a positive experience. One person explained, “My NEPHIP experience has greatly influenced my career choices. Through my internship experience, I gained an appreciation for environmental public health and the importance of food safety. I was able to begin my career in environmental public health knowing that I was equipped to learn and grow in the environment of a state agency.” Another intern shared, “I enjoyed working with my host health department thoroughly. My experience made me excited to work in a health department elsewhere, and that led me to getting my first job with my degree after I graduated. I am very thankful for the opportunity!”

Discussion

NEPHIP has positively influenced participant careers by blending academic foundations with practical experience. Interns reported that NEPHIP effectively bridged the gap between theory and real-world application, enhancing skills in communication, critical thinking, and data analysis—competencies that are valued across industries and crucial for employability. The program also bolstered resumes and facilitated networking and professional connections, although not all interns maintained these connections post-internship, which highlights an area for further investigation.

Program impact varied based on career paths. Interns who were pursuing environmental or public health roles generally valued specific facets of their experience more, while interns who were pursuing other fields still found the foundational skills useful. The shift to virtual internships during the COVID-19 pandemic was well-received for its flexibility and digital skills development, although it lacked the networking benefits of in-person formats. Our data support prior studies that highlight the immersive nature of

in-person internships, such as offering interpersonal connections, cultural insights, and direct communication (Zamora et al., 2022). Hybrid internships show promise but require more research to fully assess their effectiveness. Future iterations of NEPHIP could benefit from integrating hybrid approaches to enhance its impact and effectiveness.

NEPHIP's contribution to essential skills development is clear. A significant majority of the interns (97%) highlighted the enhancement of communication skills, a finding that aligns with published literature on the importance of communication skills in public health (Koh et al., 2011; Resnick et al., 2018). Other valued skills reported by the interns included interpersonal relations, data analysis, and critical thinking. The emphasis on remote work management, although noted by fewer participants, reflects the growing relevance of remote work management in the post-pandemic work environment.

Limitations

A key limitation of our study is the less-than-desired response rate of 45 (29%), which fell short of the 105 responses needed for statistical significance. This low response rate limits generalizability to the entire NEPHIP alumni population from 2015 to 2021. Outdated email addresses and gaps in contact information limited the reach of the questionnaire. To address these issues, NEPHIP

should establish a regular process for updating alumni contact information and create a system by which graduates can periodically update their information. These improvements will enhance the accuracy of the outreach and representativeness of future evaluations, leading to more reliable insights for program enhancement.

Conclusion

NEPHIP has demonstrated a significant positive impact on the career trajectories and professional development of its participants, as evidenced by the responses to the questionnaire. Most former interns who responded highlighted the program's effectiveness in bridging the gap between academic study and real-world application in environmental public health. Key findings from the questionnaire support NEPHIP's value. Notably, 58% of respondents entered environmental public health careers, with 70% attributing their post-graduation employment directly to NEPHIP. More specifically, respondents reported gaining crucial skills in communication, interpersonal relations, data analysis, and critical thinking. Educational advancement was common, with 62% pursuing further education, often in environmental public health or related fields. Both in-person and virtual internships provided valuable experiences, demonstrating the program's adaptability. Importantly, the internship

experience significantly helped clarify career decisions, particularly for those respondents who entered the environmental public health workforce.

Despite study limitations, questionnaire results indicate NEPHIP's strong potential to shape future environmental public health professionals. Through an ongoing process of refinement driven by participant input, NEPHIP can enhance its effectiveness in developing highly capable environmental health professionals ready to tackle today's complex environmental public health challenges. This commitment to constant evolution ensures the program remains at the forefront of preparing emerging professionals for the ever-changing landscape they will face. 🌸

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