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Past, Present, and Future

Editor's Note: To promote the growth of the environmental health profession and the academic programs that fuel that growth, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has teamed up with the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. The mission of EHAC is to enhance the education and training of students in environmental health science and protection.

Through this column, EHAC will share current trends within undergraduate and graduate environmental health programs, as well as highlight available resources and the efforts to further the environmental health field. The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views or official position of NEHA.

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Greetings, *Journal* readers! The board and council members of the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation (EHAC) are grateful to the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) for the opportunity to communicate with the environmental public health community via these pages. Now, more than ever, we look to professionals, such as yourselves, to help us improve workforce readiness by hosting interns, mentoring students and early-career practitioners, creating professional pathways, and communicating the value of an EHAC education to students and professionals who are interested in building and maintaining a well-prepared workforce.

The story of EHAC began in the 1960s when leaders in the education and practice of environmental public health identified a significant lack of well-trained practitioners, which was impacting the ability of public health jurisdictions to adequately protect the public's health. To address this deficit, NEHA (then known as the National Association of Sanitarians) authorized in 1967 the establishment of a National Accreditation Council (NAC) to "develop curricular standards for undergraduate programs in environmental health and to assist undergraduate schools with environmental health criteria" (Hatlen, 1967). NAC (now known as EHAC) accredited its first under-

graduate program at East Tennessee State University in 1969 and its first graduate degree program also at East Tennessee State University in 1977.

During the past 37 of our 56 years, more than 15,500 undergraduate and graduate students have graduated from EHAC-accredited degree programs. Currently, the 36 EHAC-accredited degree programs include 25 undergraduate and 11 graduate programs at 29 colleges and universities nationwide. In total, four of these programs are at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), two programs are at Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), including one Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institution (AANAPISI; Table 1). This year we are excited to report newly accredited graduate programs at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Washington.

EHAC is led by a council of 21 academicians ($n = 11$) and practitioners ($n = 10$) who are deeply committed to growing a well-trained workforce. Council members bring their significant knowledge and experience to the development and maintenance of accreditation criteria, provide review for re-accrediting programs and accrediting new programs, and participate on standing committees important to operations within EHAC.

The current mission of EHAC is to enhance the education and training of students in environmental health science and protection. Accomplished EHAC-accredited degree program alumni provide evidence of success in this endeavor. EHAC accreditation ensures workforce-ready, entry-level practitioners who are well-prepared to support the goals

TABLE 1

Institutions Accredited by the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council

Institution	Location	Program Type	Initial Date of Accreditation
Baylor University	Waco, Texas	Undergraduate	2010
		Graduate	2022
Benedict College (HBCU)	Columbia, South Carolina	Undergraduate	2004
California State University at Northridge (HSI, AANAPISI)	Northridge, California	Undergraduate	1973
		Graduate	1979
California State University at San Bernardino (HSI)	San Bernardino, California	Undergraduate	2004
Central Michigan University	Mount Pleasant, Michigan	Undergraduate	2013
Colorado State University	Fort Collins, Colorado	Undergraduate	1973
East Carolina University	Greenville, North Carolina	Undergraduate	1974
		Graduate	1981
East Central University	Ada, Oklahoma	Undergraduate	1975
East Tennessee State University	Johnson City, Tennessee	Undergraduate	1969
Eastern Kentucky University	Richmond, Kentucky	Undergraduate	1985
		Graduate	2012
Fort Valley State University (HBCU)	Fort Valley, Georgia	Graduate	2015
Illinois State University	Normal, Illinois	Undergraduate	1977
Mississippi Valley State University (HBCU)	Itta Bena, Mississippi	Graduate	2005
Missouri Southern State University	Joplin, Missouri	Undergraduate	1996
Montana State University	Bozeman, Montana	Undergraduate	2019
Ohio University	Athens, Ohio	Undergraduate	1992
Old Dominion University	Norfolk, Virginia	Undergraduate	1983
State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry	Syracuse, New York	Undergraduate	2017
Texas Southern University (HBCU)	Houston, Texas	Undergraduate	2006
University of Findlay	Findlay, Ohio	Undergraduate	2012
		Graduate	2005
University of Georgia, Athens	Athens, Georgia	Undergraduate	1984
University of Illinois Springfield	Springfield, Illinois	Graduate	2006
University of Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	Graduate	2024
University of Washington	Seattle, Washington	Undergraduate	1976
		Graduate	2024
University of Wisconsin Eau Claire	Eau Claire, Wisconsin	Undergraduate	1975
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh	Oshkosh, Wisconsin	Undergraduate	2013
West Chester University	West Chester, Pennsylvania	Undergraduate	2008
Western Carolina University	Cullowhee, North Carolina	Undergraduate	1984
Western Kentucky University	Bowling Green, Kentucky	Undergraduate	2022
		Graduate	2019

Note. AANAPISI = Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institution; HBCU = historically Black college and university; HSI = Hispanic-serving institution.

and missions of local and state public health organizations, federal organizations, and private industry. Graduates from accredited masters-level degree programs can immediately apply for environmental health officer positions within the U.S. Public Health Service and are prepared for careers in practice as well as related research. Alums have found exciting and meaningful careers, whether they spend their lives serving their hometowns at local or state public health jurisdictions or rise to the rank of rear admiral in the Indian Health Service.

EHAC is proud of the accomplishments of our accredited programs and their graduates and celebrates their successes in the environmental public health community. We also recognize, however, that the workforce currently finds itself in a similar position to that in the 1960s—there is a tremendous need for well-trained, workforce-ready practitioners. Gerding et al. (2019) predicted the retirement of more than one quarter of the workforce by 2024. A report by the de Beaumont Foundation (2021) estimated that the existing public health workforce needed approximately 9,500 new environmental public health practitioners in the U.S. to “provide the infrastructure and a minimum package of public health services.”

More recently, Leider et al. (2023) compared the intent to leave or retire data collected among state and local governmental public health employees surveyed in 2017 and 2021, with actual separations through 2021. Findings revealed a “mass exodus” of, on average, approximately 50% of state and local public health employees between 2017 and 2021. Younger employees were found to be leaving at an even higher rate of 75% (Leider et al., 2023). Regardless of if these losses reflect pandemic-era impacts on employee departures, the result is a significant deficit in the number of current practitioners, as well as the loss of future leaders likely represented in the fleeing cohort of younger employees.

The organizational growth and sustainability of EHAC also face similar challenges to those challenges being faced by the workforce. To help meet both challenges, EHAC is undertaking strategic planning to address organizational needs, while being responsive to the academic rigor necessary to produce well-trained professionals amid the changing workforce landscape. EHAC is also com-

mitted to continuing its focus on ensuring a diverse workforce by increasing the number of accredited degree programs at HBCUs, tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs). One barrier that we have identified for MSIs is that the cost to prepare for initial accreditation prevents many from initiating the process. To address this barrier, we partnered with NEHA, funded through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), to launch a pilot project that provides seed money to institutions to apply for initial accreditation. For 2025, three institutions have been awarded funding, including one HBCU and one tribal-serving institution.

The environmental public health field offers a multitude of professional career and research opportunities nationwide. While established among professionals, however, environmental public health is less known by the public and politicians. It has been called the invisible profession, as people rarely hear about the practice unless there is a major public health event. Due to this invisibility, middle school, high school, and college students often do not learn about the depth and breadth of career opportunities in environmental public health until they are juniors or seniors in college, when it can be too late to change their major.

EHAC is collaborating with our partners to address the workforce shortage by raising the visibility of the profession. The NEHA National Environmental Public Health Internship Program (NEHIP), supported by CDC, places students enrolled in EHAC-accredited degree programs at local and state environmental health departments nationwide. These internships are a win for students, host departments, and the public, and are useful vehicles for marketing and promoting practice opportunities. Word of mouth exchanges about internships and other practice experiences have proven the best recruitment tool for attracting students to environmental public health degrees and, subsequently, the profession. These students convey their excitement to their family and friends at college and back home, possibly introducing the field to individuals for the first time!

In closing, while the challenges of the day continue to stress our public health systems, we all have a role to play in ensuring a workforce prepared to meet those challenges. Our council commits to maintaining quality accreditation criteria resulting in risk-oriented

critical thinkers prepared to address complex environmental public health problems. We will continue working with our partners to raise awareness of and support for environmental public health needs and opportunities by promoting financial investment in growing the number of NEHIP internship options and host sites, encouraging student participation in NEHA, creating pathways to the profession, and developing student-oriented marketing tools and campaigns.

We encourage you, as professionals, to get involved and convince your organization to host an intern, speak about environmental public health career paths and the impact of an EHAC-accredited education at your local high schools and community colleges, and/or get involved with the EHAC organization as a council member. The opportunities for action abound to build relationships focused on growing a well-prepared environmental public health workforce. Visit our website at www.nehspac.org for more information. 🌸

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