

Mentored Experiential Learning for Future Public Health Leaders

Troy Hoffman, MPA; Luceta McRoy, PhD; Jigsa Tola, DrPH, MPH; Andrea Salcedo, DrPH, MPH; Olivia Golston, MPH; Sade Mulkey, DSW, MPH, MSW; Harolyn Belcher, MD, MHS; Michael Joseph, PhD, MPH; Jamal Percy, DrPH, MPA, CHES; Cynthia Trawick, EdD, MA; Nythea Tolbert, PhD, MPH; Gary Piercey, EdD; Jeanine Buchanich, MEd, MPH, PhD; Maureen Lichtveld, MD, MPH

ABSTRACT

The CDC John R. Lewis Undergraduate Public Health Scholars Program supports undergraduate scholars in exploring education and careers in public health. Throughout the summer experience, scholars participate in mentored experiential learning opportunities designed to support professional identity formation and career readiness. In 2025, across 7 program sites, the program recruited over 190 mentors through institutional and community networks aligned with shared public health goals. The selection, recruitment, and training process for mentors prepares them to support scholars in navigating through public health exploration and placement. Additional mentoring support structures are integrated across program sites to support scholars during the summer program and as they pursue future public health education and career opportunities. Mentor presence throughout each component of the summer program has a lasting impact on how scholars perceive public health. This scalable model offers practical guidance for implementing mentorship programs across multiple program sites while maintaining quality and consistency.

KEY WORDS: mentorship, graduate programs, community networking, internship placement, alumni scholars support

Introduction

The John R. Lewis Undergraduate Public Health Scholars Program (Lewis Scholars) is a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)-funded pathways summer program, administered across 7 programs, that advances and supports students interested in public health careers and prepares undergraduate scholars to meet future workforce needs.¹ Public health experience, exposure, and disciplines vary

among students applying to the Lewis Scholars program, from those majoring in public health to those who have never taken public health–related courses. During the program, participating students receive extensive training and experiential learning opportunities and develop a research poster. Program recruitment and implementation are also centered around under-resourced students interested in public health. Specific details and strategies on how recruitment and implementation are addressed across the 7 program sites are described further in accompanying articles. With mentorship serving as one of the pillars of the Lewis Scholars program, the goal is to expose students to public health in action, while also supporting them academically and cocurricularly.

While each Lewis Scholars program site comprises both common and unique elements, mentorship serves as a core component toward scholars' success. A mentor is defined as “an individual with expertise who can help develop the career of a mentee,” with an emphasis on their ability to serve as a career coach, as well as a support system.² Lewis Scholars across all programs receive comprehensive mentoring support, ranging from community involvement

Author Affiliations: Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, New York, New York (Hoffman and Joseph); Kennedy Krieger, Baltimore, Maryland (McRoy, Belcher, and Percy); Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia (Tola); University of California, Los Angeles, California (Salcedo, Golston); University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan (Mulkey); Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia (Trawick, and Tolbert); Southern Plains Tribal Health Board (Piercey); University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Buchanich, and Lichtveld).

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Correspondence: Troy Hoffman, MPA, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, New York, NY 10032 (th2654@cumc.columbia.edu).

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and institutional placements to individual and group professional development training. Mentorship is applied through experiential learning via academic and applied research, as well as field projects to support scholars' future academic and professional development. This article explores the benefits of holistic mentorship, which enables scholars to have career-long connections with program staff, researchers, faculty of interest, and community staff—all of whom assist with shaping their futures in public health.

Program Mentoring Structure

CDC

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention supports program partners with running summer programs focused on addressing public health education gaps and issues. The goal is to empower the program partners to provide public health exposure and guidance to a vetted and selected group of students.

Program Partners

There are 7 program partners supported by the CDC who are a mix of higher education colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations equipped to support the mission related to public health education. Each entity serves as a public health voice and leader in their respective communities and has the capacity to facilitate each component of the John R. Lewis Undergraduate Public Health Scholars Program, which includes mentorship, field placement experience, and coursework.

College/Universities

Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health (SPHSP), Morehouse College (IMHOTEP), University of Michigan School of Public Health (FPHLP), University of Pittsburgh School of Public Health, and UCLA Fielding School of Public Health.

Nonprofit/Institute

Southern Plains Tribal Health Board (THESIS) and Kennedy Krieger-Johns Hopkins.

Mentors

There are various mentor types covered throughout this article. The mentors address a range of providing academic and professional advisement and guidance across various perspectives.

Approach

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning through applied public health opportunities provides individualized and group internships, mentorship, and coaching tailored to each scholar's level, and public health interest is key to ensuring that scholars understand what a future public health career entails and supports achievement of academic and professional goals.

The Lewis Scholars program provides a range of experiential learning opportunities that enable scholars to apply their academic knowledge to practice, research, and policy. Scholars are paired with 1 or more internship mentors, which may include placement at a governmental agency, academic institution, or community-based organization, to gain a broad understanding of the interdisciplinary approaches to public health. During the eight-to-eleven-week program, the mentors actively engage scholars to strengthen public health experience and knowledge and broaden their exposure to real-world public health environments. Scholars are matched with an internship mentor at their program site based on interest and program criteria identified during the application vetting process. Program sites may provide a focused experience or multiple experiences for each scholar. Mentors expose scholars to applied public health research where mentorship extends beyond observation to active participation in public health practice, including community engagement and data collection and analysis activities. The end-of-program deliverable(s), including presentations, posters, and papers, are guided in partnership with program mentors for professional and peer audiences. These relational aspects of mentorship foster preparedness for graduate education or entry into the public health workforce.

Mentor Recruitment and Training

While recruitment and training strategies slightly vary, the 7 program sites recruited 190 mentors in 2025 through some common techniques, including leveraging institutional and community partnerships aligned with shared public health goals and objectives. Program sites recruit a diverse mentor pool through targeted outreach to established relationships, networking at conferences and public health events, school campus-wide outreach, mentor application webpages, information sessions for prospective mentors, and collaboration with internal teams and leadership. Alumni, former mentors, and referrals also play a key role in expanding networks.

Most program sites sustain mentor engagement through regular communication, site visits, and check-ins to keep mentors aware of their former mentees’ accomplishments and future plans. Partners use a thorough review process to ensure alignment between mentor expertise, project feasibility, and student learning objectives. Some institutions further support this process by maintaining centralized mentor databases that streamline recruitment, matching, and year-round communication, strengthening long-term engagement and program continuity.

The training sessions developed by each program provide mentors with examples of acceptable final projects from past cohorts, key points of contact, and general guidelines on effective mentoring practices. The general items covered across each program site include hosting an orientation for assigned scholars, discussing career choices and desired outcomes for the summer, and assisting scholars with poster development accompanying their research. Furthermore, partners define acceptable project scopes to ensure scholars engage in meaningful, hands-on experiences rather than primarily administrative tasks. The training helps clarify mentor roles and expectations in supporting scholars. Mentors are further supported through regular check-ins, site visits, and ongoing access to program staff whenever additional assistance is needed.

Mentors receive training and guidance on the program’s expectations, responsibilities, and deliverables leading up to and throughout the program. Comprehensive mentor orientation across program sites

supports consistency in scholar experiences and program expectations.³ Trained mentors are equipped with adequate framework to aid scholars in next steps in their professional journey. This includes setting research goals, reflecting on their public health interest (academically and professionally), as well as expanding their professional networks and exposure to academic and nonacademic areas of public health practice.

Additional Mentorship

In addition to internship mentors, Lewis Scholars programs incorporate multiple mentorship structures, including advisors, preceptors, coaches, and near-peer mentors. The Michigan Future Public Health Leaders Program (FPHLP) uses advisors, typically public health professionals or University of Michigan faculty, who mentor groups of 6–10 scholars and provide guidance related to educational and career development. FPHLP also uses the faculty at the University of Michigan for advisors. Kennedy Krieger Maternal Health Careers/Research Initiatives for Student Enhancement-Undergraduate Program (MCHC/RISE-UP) incorporates professional coaches from Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions and the Kennedy Krieger Institute who provide weekly individualized coaching aligned with scholars’ professional goals.

Other programs provide opportunities for graduate student near-peer mentorship, to learn more about graduate school from current students. The University of Pittsburgh has 2 cohorts of mentors: academic mentors and internship placement site preceptors.

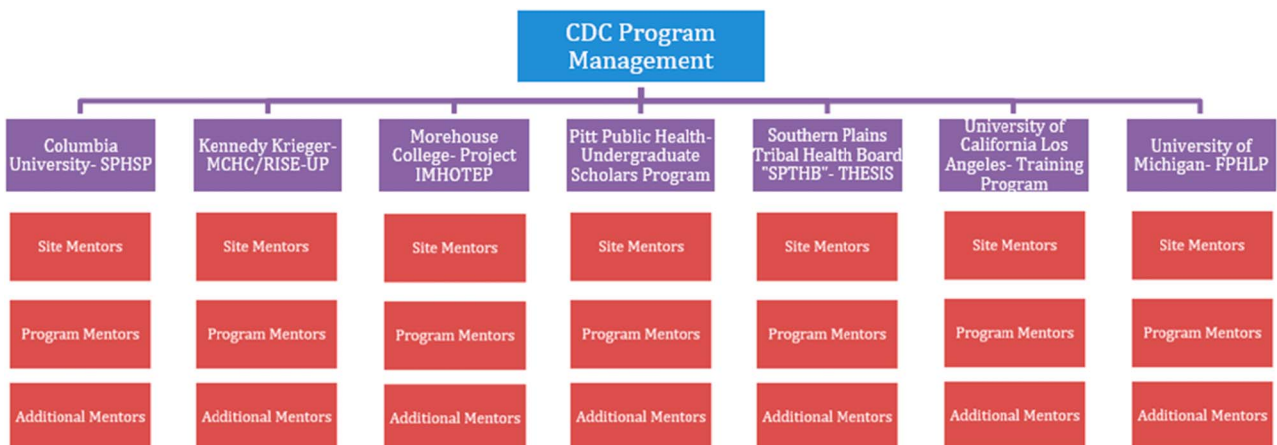


FIGURE 1 John R. Lewis Program Structure with 7 Program Sites. *Site mentors: Preceptors assigned to each student. These individuals primarily work with scholars on research and field placement projects. Most mentors have 1 scholar assigned to them, while few may have multiple. *Program mentors: Program staff and associated internal affiliates. These individuals provide guidance and structure to scholars. This includes but is not limited to educational advising, identifying potential academic programs of interest, initial screening for field placement/preceptors, and other quality-of-life–related support. *Additional mentors: Faculty, program alumni, community members, and external partners. These individuals help provide real-time examples of public health in action. This exposure gives context to what scholars are generally interested in and aids with determining/confirming scholars’ interests.

Each of these mentor cohorts are trained in advance of the program. Since most of the mentors and preceptors have been with the program for several years, the training builds on previous experience.

Program structure around mentorship is presented in Figure 1.

Post Program

The 7 program sites continue engaging and supporting Lewis Scholar alumni through providing letters of recommendation, sharing academic and career updates, and seeking ongoing advice and mentorship reflecting the lasting impact of the experience that transcends the summer program. Program leaders across the Lewis Scholars programs maintain ongoing communication with scholars who have completed the program through institutional visits, host students at conferences, and follow their success on social media platforms such as LinkedIn. Periodic alumni surveys are conducted to track educational and career progression. Alumni outcomes are described further in the editorial that accompanies this article. Ongoing mentorship beyond the summer program is critical to ensuring graduate education retention.⁴ Programs based on holistic mentorship with fewer gaps in coverage tend to yield stronger outcomes related to mentee success, specifically, student persistence related to pursuing their education and graduating on time. Mentorship serves as guidance. Many students who enter the graduate school space are doing so, thanks to the mentorship that they are ushered into ahead of matriculation. Having a peer-to-peer or faculty mentor at the institution of choice plays a critical role in both empowering students to pursue their education and positioning them to do well. Effective guidance can help steer scholars post program.

Results

Internship mentors come from diverse professional backgrounds and typically have at least 3 years of experience in mentorship and work in public health research, health care, community health, academia, or policy. In 2025, there were over 190 mentors, of whom only 58% had formal academic training in public health. Across all programs, mentors had prior mentoring experience, with 72% having previously mentored undergraduate students and 74% returning from previous program years. While all mentors were public health facing, non-public health-trained mentors included individuals from diverse backgrounds such as physicians, certified doulas, criminal justice, social work, education, and law.

TABLE 1
2025 Internship Placements (N = 247)

Internship organization type	N	%
State health department	10	4%
Federal agency	19	8%
Academic or research institution	79	32%
Nonprofit organization	61	25%
Private for-profit organization	0	0%
Community-based organization	44	18%
Tribal organization	5	2%
Faith-based organization	1	0%
Health care system	28	11%
Internship type		
In-person	173	70%
Hybrid	23	9%
Virtual/remote	51	21%
Internship topic area		
Clinical	19	8%
Community health	136	55%
Laboratory	0	0%
Research	79	32%
Policy	13	5%
Other	0	0%

Number of internship placements is greater than the number of scholars (N = 229) due to some scholars having 2 placements.

Experiential learning opportunities were designed to align with scholars' interests and career goals and are summarized in Table 1. Across the 7 program sites in 2025, there were 247 experiential learning placements, with most scholars having 1 placement, though some had 2. The most common placement settings were academic or research institutions (32%), nonprofit organizations (25%), and community-based organizations (18%). The predominant focus areas were community health (55%) and research (32%). Common experiential learning activities by scholars (n = 229) are outlined in Table 2.

Discussion

The 7 programs implement mentorship models that foster personal and professional growth for scholars during and beyond the program experience. Mentorship is intentionally tailored to scholar interests and career goals, with opportunities spanning the field of public health in topic areas and settings. Mentors come from multiple professional backgrounds, highlighting diverse pathways into the field of public health

TABLE 2
2025 Internship Activities (N = 229)

Internship Activities (Select all that Apply)	N	%
Community engagement	108	47
Community needs assessments	60	26
Community-facing presentations	46	20
Data analysis: Qualitative	93	41
Data analysis: Quantitative	97	42
Data collection: Qualitative	94	41
Data collection: Quantitative	93	41
Data entry	68	30
Environmental scans	13	6
Health communications	104	45
Health education	105	46
Health promotion	109	48
Information dissemination to community members	53	23
Interacting with community members	100	44
Literature review	89	39
Manuscript preparation	6	3
Policy review	23	10
Presentation of data to professional audiences	124	54
Professional shadowing	75	33
Systematic reviews	31	14
Technical assistance: Community members	7	3
Technical assistance: partner organizations	48	21

and broadening scholars' perspectives on potential career trajectories.

Support for scholars extends beyond the program, as all program sites continue to invest in alumni through mentorship and ongoing opportunities that foster academic and career advancement. For example, Columbia Mailman and Michigan offer scholarship support to alumni pursuing public health graduate degrees, helping to make advanced public health education more accessible.

A substantial proportion of alumni are currently employed in public health or related health professions. Recent reductions in public health funding present

Implications for Policy & Practice

- Structured multilevel mentorship helps prepare students for graduate education while also laying the foundation for future public health careers.
- Using matching strategies that consider the needs of scholars can enhance mentor–scholar relationships and scholarly understanding of public health.
- Sustaining high-quality scholar engagement requires the development of mentor training resources and tools.
- Practitioners across governmental public health, academia, and nonprofit sectors contribute to training and mentoring the next generation, supporting a steady cohort of qualified professionals and maintaining high-quality public health services.
- Efforts collectively covered through mentorship steer students toward making effective decisions around interest in public health. Upon finishing the program, scholars can make informed decisions around what discipline in public health they are most and least interested in. Mentorship and program experience aids in clarifying what public health involves and what next steps scholars should seek next along their professional journey.
- Scholars who previously had questions around their interest in graduate school degree programs have clearer vision, thanks to internship exposure and other mentoring components around their interest in pursuing a public health degree in a Master of Public Health (MPH), Master of Healthcare Administration (MHA), Master of Science (MS), or a non–public health science–related degree. The mentor and internship placement assigned to each Lewis Scholar contribute toward providing justification as to why further education in public health is critical upon interacting with individuals actively contributing to public health causes both with and without educational reinforcement. Experience with mentors and internship placements may also encourage students to explore interdisciplinary and cross-sector opportunities in alternative career paths.

ongoing workforce challenges, and program alumni have expressed temporary expansion of their fields of interest to improve their employment prospects. Program and mentor support for alumni and current scholars remains critical to help encourage scholars during this time. While accommodating the interest of all scholars is a year-to-year challenge, mentors support students in navigating their professional space. These efforts can also lead to mentors collaborating with associated community/organization partners to ensure that scholars have an enriching experience. For example,

Columbia Mailman has some scholars placed with designated mentors specializing in a specific function of public health service, which at times leads to the same scholars being routed to connect with a third-party organization based on exposure interest.

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