

Pathways to Public Health: Advancing Health Equity Through Professional Development

BACKGROUND

The project’s goal was to enhance the professional development of master’s-level students through immersive engagement with public health leaders, equity-driven initiatives, and applied learning—supporting the College’s commitment to preparing students to address public health challenges, particularly in rural and underserved communities, while fostering inclusion. Over three days in October 2024, Adjunct Professor & SME, Missi Wooldridge, MPH and four students traveled to New York City to participate in NYU Langone’s 10th Annual Health Equity Symposium, “This is Public Health” Graduate Fair, and three service-learning experiences with Housing Works, Inc., a nonprofit at the forefront of addressing homelessness and HIV/AIDS through advocacy, comprehensive services, and innovative social enterprises.

Student Outcomes:

- Enhance understanding of health equity and public health strategies to address systemic inequities
- Develop skills to address health disparities
- Participate in hands-on public health practice through real-world application of course material and applied learning opportunities with innovative public health interventions, such as harm reduction, housing services for vulnerable populations, and sustainable workforce development and diversified funding models
- Gain exposure to doctoral programs and career paths to make informed decisions about their future academic and professional journeys
- Network with leading public health organizations, practitioners, scholars, and peers to foster connections that will support their growth

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ACTIVITIES: DAY 1

- Arrival in NYC
- Team Welcome Meeting & Networking Dinner
- Site Visit 1: Housing Works Gramercy Thrift Shop
 - Organizational Overview and Mission
 - Discussion: Retail, Social Enterprise Funding Model
 - Guided Tour
 - Q&A with Management and Staff

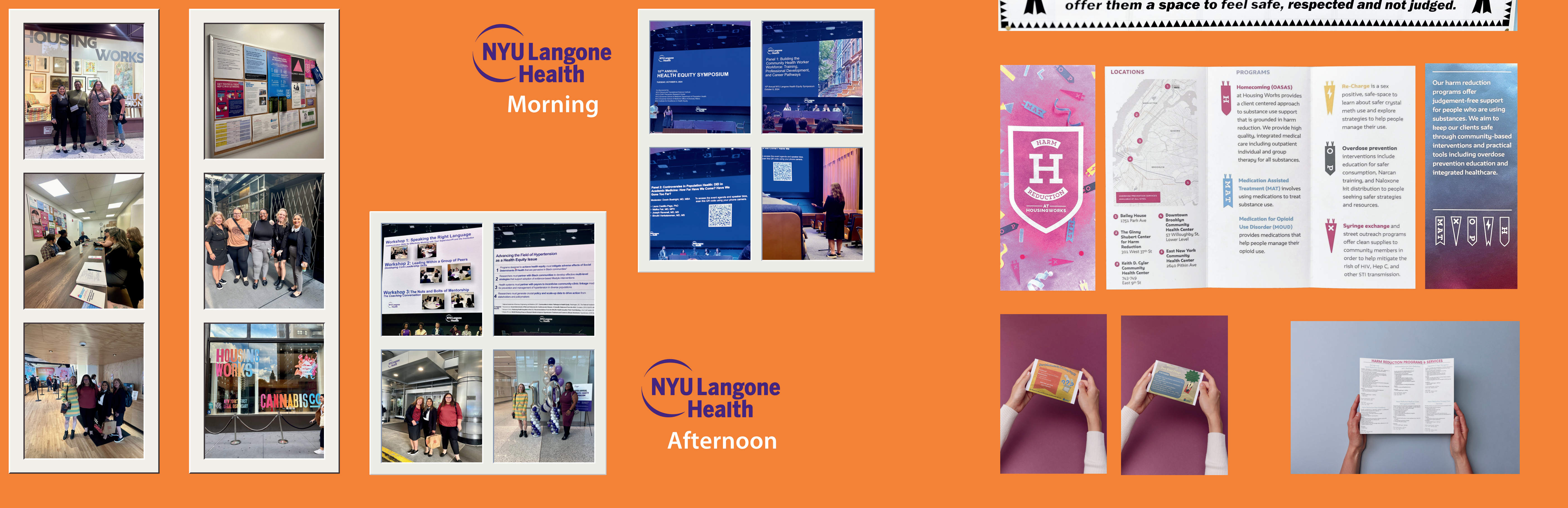
ACTIVITIES: DAY 2

- Attend 10th Annual NYU Langone Health Equity Symposium
 - Sessions focused on diversifying the health workforce and addressing social determinants of health
- Site Visit 2: Housing Works Cannabis Co.
 - Introduction to Cannabis Operations & Regulatory Oversight
 - Discussion: Dispensary, Social Enterprise Funding Model, Economic Justice, Community Reinvestment, and Health Equity
 - Guided Tour and Q & A with Management
- Attend “This is Public Health” Graduate Fair

ACTIVITIES: DAY 3

- Site Visit 3: Housing Works’ The Ginny Shubert Center for Harm Reduction
 - Presentation from Housing Works Leadership Team
 - Introduction to Harm Reduction Principles
 - Overview of Programs, Services, Populations Served, and Locations
 - Community Partnerships and Stakeholder Engagement
 - Key Successes, Challenges, and Strategic Advocacy
 - Q & A with Leadership and Medical Staff
 - Guided Tour of Health Center
 - Individualized Interaction with Direct Service Clients
- Departure

THE APPLIED LEARNING EXPERIENCE



EVALUATION

Methodology: A mixed-methods survey was administered to all student participants to assess the experience’s impact on their knowledge, skills, and professional development, with a focus on health equity, harm reduction, and applied public health practice.

- Quantitative: 5-point Likert scale items measured self-reported changes in knowledge, self-efficacy, and perceived value of key learning components
- Qualitative: Open-ended questions explored students’ motivations, perceived high-impact activities, and suggested applications to academic and career goals
- Administration: Delivered via Google Forms and completion required within two weeks of participation. Responses were confidential but not anonymous, and students were provided with contact information for support during the evaluation process

RESULTS

All participants agreed or strongly agreed that the applied learning experience resulted in:

- Increased knowledge and understanding of health equity concepts
- Improved skills in understanding and addressing health needs among vulnerable populations
- Increased self efficacy in applying harm reduction principles to public health practice
- Valuable exposure to innovative public health interventions

Qualitative Themes:

- Expanded perspectives on career pathways and renewed motivation
- Inspired new academic and professional goals including doctoral pursuits (i.e., DrPH & PhD)
- Emphasized applied learning as essential to public health education with strong demand for additional pathway opportunities such as this one
- Strengthened insight into how diversified funding sustains community-based public health programs

CONCLUSION

Students not only deepened their understanding of health equity but critically examined systemic exclusion and identified ways to drive change in their communities and within the broader public health workforce. Participating in this project helped students understand the landscape of public health education and professional development, positioning them for future success. The Pathways to Public Health project provided students with a opportunity to apply knowledge gained in the classroom and connect theory with practice, empowering them to become stronger public health leaders.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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