

Step-by-Step: Developing Student Projects in a Public Health Workplace

1. Assess Organizational Needs

- Start by asking yourself:
 - What current work or initiatives could use extra support?
 - Are there “wish list” projects we’ve had to delay due to limited staff?
 - Are there routine tasks or short-term projects that could be completed by a student that also provide a valuable training experience?
- Work that is meaningful but not urgent is ideal for interns.
- Reflect on your organization’s culture and working norms. How will the student be expected to assimilate and adapt in order to be successful?

2. Identify Learning Opportunities

- A good project isn’t just helpful to your team; it should help the student grow. Consider:
 - What skills or knowledge will the student gain?
 - Does the work align with core public health competencies (e.g., data analysis, health communication, program planning)?
 - Is there a direct connection between a student’s academic training and real-world application?
- Review the student’s program or practicum requirements if available. They often include learning objectives you can align with identified learning opportunities.

3. Match the Project Scope to a Student Timeframe and Assess Appropriateness

- Avoid projects that are too complex, vague, or dependent on long-term results. Consider:
 - What can be reasonably accomplished in 10–12 weeks (or the length of the internship)?
 - Is there at least one clear deliverable (e.g., report, presentation, toolkit, campaign)?
 - Are there milestones or checkpoints you can build in?
- Projects with a clear beginning, middle, and end work best.
- Ensure that the project is beyond administrative tasks and duties and is appropriate for undergraduate or graduate students. It is not appropriate to utilize student workers to fill employment gaps/shortages.

4. Consider the Student's Background and Interests

- If possible, recruit a student whose experience and interests match the project. Consider the student's:
 - Skill level (undergrad vs. MPH vs. doctoral)
 - Interests (epidemiology, community health, health policy, etc.)
 - Career goals

5. Ensure Support and Supervision

- Before settling on a project, consider:
 - Who will serve as the student's dedicated supervisor (you or a colleague)? Who can serve as a back up supervisor if you are unavailable?
 - Do staff have the capacity to answer questions, provide feedback, or offer training?
 - Has the staff mentored students before? What worked? What didn't?
 - Will the student have the opportunity to be exposed to different parts of the organization? Can you arrange for the student to meet with and observe a wide range of staff to gain broad insights into the organization?
- Students need clear context, responsibilities, and expectations; with ample opportunity for reflection, guidance, and feedback. Make sure you assess whether you and your team have the bandwidth to provide this.

6. Sample Public Health Project Ideas for Interns

Depending on your organization, here are some possible student-appropriate projects:

Skill Area	Example Project
Health Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop or adapt a health promotion toolkit or workshop for a specific population
Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clean and analyze data after a data collection process (collecting the data is likely to take too long for a typical internship length) ● Create dashboards to visualize health trends
Program Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conduct a small-scale evaluation of a health program ● Interview program participants to gather qualitative evaluation data ● Assist with data collection for a larger evaluation process
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conduct a literature review on a current or emerging public health topic ● Draft a policy brief or fact sheet for a public health advocacy campaign

Health Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create social media content or educational materials on a health topic• Develop a communications plan for a specific audience• Create culturally appropriate educational materials for a specific population• Evaluate the readability or accessibility of existing outreach materials• Develop a resource guide on a specific topic or for a specific audience
Environmental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assist in mapping local environmental hazards using GIS tools• Collect and analyze soil and water samples
Administrative & Operational Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assist with grant writing or reporting by compiling relevant data• Review and improve data collection tools or intake forms• Staff vaccine clinics, health fairs, and other community events

7. Draft a Basic Project Description

- Before the student arrives, create a brief outline of the project:
 - Project title
 - Purpose and goals
 - Key tasks and timeline
 - Final deliverable(s)
 - Skills the student will gain
 - Who they'll be working with