

**GROUP MAKING ITS MARK BY FOSTERING DISCUSSION AND ACTION AMONG SPH STUDENTS COMMITTED TO WORKING ON BEHALF OF POPULATIONS OF COLOR, AND HELPING MEMBERS SUCCEED.**



# Students of Color for Public Health:

## Engaging Diverse Communities, Supporting Each Other

**Above: Raphael Travis (lower right), a doctoral student and a founder of the school's Students of Color for Public Health (SCPH), also serves as youth liaison at the UCLA Center for Adolescent Health Promotion. Here, he leads a Youth Community Advisory Board meeting at the UCLA Challenge Course, along with Typhanye Penniman (standing, third from left), also a doctoral student and SCPH member.**

What started in 2001 as an informal support network among a handful of students has blossomed into a major asset at the UCLA School of Public Health and beyond. Students of Color for Public Health (SCPH), now an officially recognized UCLA student group with funding from the school and the California Wellness Foundation, is making its mark as a leader in recruiting populations of color to the field of public health, supporting students from diverse communities, and fostering discussion on critical issues affecting these communities.

SCPH was the brainchild of several students who bonded over common backgrounds and interests, including a commitment to working on behalf of populations of color. "We would get together and talk about classes and the work we were doing, work in the communities we were from, and to generally support one another as we were going through the program," recalls Raphael Travis, who came to the school in the fall of 2000 and is now completing his doctoral studies. "Eventually it got to the point where we thought we should do something more formal."

One of the group's primary goals was to help entering students of color feel welcomed. "We wanted to make sure these students knew they had a place in

the school, and a community available to them that was committed to public health as a profession, committed to working with disenfranchised populations, and committed to supporting them during their time as students,” says Travis.

“Some of us always seemed to be bumping heads in the same circles and talking about the same issues,” adds Taigy Thomas, a doctoral student who was also among the founders. “So we decided to become more organized, so that we could have a collective voice and advocate as a group for the communities we worked in, and for ourselves.”

Once that decision was made and SCPH was established, the ranks of the group quickly grew. SCPH – open to any student interested in public health issues affecting communities of color – now has approximately 100 members, including students in the master’s and doctoral programs, as well as alumni who are active supporters. It is dedicated to the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of color at the UCLA School of Public Health, and to strengthening the social support, career networking and advocacy efforts for the school’s students and alumni of color.

The first participants were so committed to making a difference in their communities and in each other’s lives that initial activities were funded out of their own pockets. But before long, they were receiving support from the Dean’s Office. “We approached Dean [Linda] Rosenstock to get her buy-in and she was 100 percent behind it, both in her words and in her actions, which made it a lot easier for us,” says Dr. Kynna Wright, one of the group’s original members, who has since been awarded her Ph.D.

In addition to offering SCPH support through the school’s discretionary fund, Rosenstock assisted the organization in writing grant proposals for additional funding. Since 2002, SCPH has received financial support from the California Wellness Foundation.

“This extraordinary organization was built from within from the passions of several students and their knowledge that we as a school could do better,” says Rosenstock. “In a few short years, SCPH has grown and become increasingly influential and respected.”

Increasing attention is being paid to the persistent – and in many cases widening – health disparities across racial and ethnic groups, with underserved minority populations being disproportionately afflicted when it comes to many health conditions. Among SCPH’s aims is to facilitate efforts among students interested in working to address these concerns. “In public health we work toward social justice and making things more equitable, and it’s

difficult to do that when you are constantly bombarded by the negative aspects of your community,” says Vincecia Garcia, a second-year M.P.H. student who currently serves as SCPH co-chair. “We think it’s important to take a more optimistic point of view and help shed light on what students can do in a way that will inspire them to go in and make a difference.”

Adds Angie Otiniano, also a second-year M.P.H. student and SCPH co-chair: “Students in SCPH are passionate about these issues because these are things that are happening in their community, not just things they’re learning about. Having this network gives us the opportunity to meet people who are interested in and knowledgeable about different aspects of public health affecting populations of color, and to bounce ideas off of each other.”



**Doctoral student Taigy Thomas, here giving a lecture on meditation as a form of stress reduction, was an SCPH founder.**

Discussions on health issues of concern to populations of color range from the informal to the more structured, including presentations by faculty and public health professionals, many of whom are involved in community-based activities similar to what SCPH members plan to pursue after graduation. “Sometimes issues affecting low-income communities don’t get as much attention as they should,” says Jabar Akbar, a doctoral student and SCPH member. “This organization not only keeps these issues at the forefront, but ensures that diverse voices are heard when we’re talking about communities of color, and that those voices include people from those communities.”

SCPH members note that given how much of the effort to eliminate health disparities affecting

**Below: Dean Linda Rosenstock with students from the Youth Into Health Professions program, an introductory public health course offered to high school and community college students in South Los Angeles; SPH staff; and members of Students of Color for Public Health.**

populations of color involves grassroots, community-level strategies, it is important that more of the people implementing those strategies be people who are from those communities and understand their dynamics. “There is a heavy push to get more people of color into public health so that they can go into the communities and do the work that needs to be done,” says Typhanye Penniman, a doctoral student who has been active in SCPH since coming to the school in 2002. “If you’re familiar with the community and you’re involving the community in your work, you are more likely to know who the key people are that you need to reach.”

With that in mind, SCPH has placed a high priority on encouraging talented students of color to apply to the UCLA School of Public Health. SCPH members have logged many hours at community colleges and other settings where they can talk to undergraduates in underserved communities about the field of public health and the school’s community-based efforts. “If you’re a student in an affluent community, you tend to have a lot more opportunities to hear about what’s out there for you,” says Penniman. “We want to make sure students in low-income communities are getting the same information.”

One of the key outreach efforts that SCPH has helped to spearhead is the school’s Youth Into

Health Professions (YIHP) course. The introductory public health course, which Penniman taught last year, is offered free of charge in South Los Angeles and draws high school and community college students from the Watts and Compton areas, giving them the opportunity to earn college credit and to be exposed to the possibilities in public health. In addition to serving as instructors and co-instructors for the course, SCPH members have been paired with the youths to serve as mentors. Among the activities is “A Day Away at UCLA,” in which YIHP enrollees are brought to the campus for a tour and further guidance.

“It’s great for students from these communities to see people who look like them,” says Wright, who was involved in establishing the YIHP course and served as its first instructor. “They can see what we’re doing and know not only that we care, but that we are there to help them if they want to pursue education in public health.”

SCPH outreach efforts have also included talks about public health to members of other student organizations at UCLA, including those that support students of color at both the graduate and undergraduate levels; participation in community health fairs throughout Los Angeles; and presentations at conferences such as the Pilipinos for Community Health Pre-Health Panel, the California State University, Northridge Pre-Health Panel, and the 4th Annual Womyn of Color Conference at UC Santa Barbara.





Left: Vincecia Garcia, SCPH co-chair, greets incoming students at a welcome luncheon in September.

SCPH also works closely with the school's Student Affairs Office at orientations and other student events.

This year's group is interested in expanding on SCPH's reach to become involved in more off-campus activities, as well as working with other student groups to assist with recruitment and other forms of supporting youths in underserved communities. "We feel that since we have the privilege of being at this excellent institution in this amazingly diverse city, we should be doing more to apply what we learn in the classroom to assisting the communities we're learning about," says Jennifer Garcia, a second-year doctoral student.

Upon entering the school as a Ph.D. student last year, Jennifer Garcia was immediately drawn to the sense of community she felt at SCPH's social events. She was asked to serve as the group's treasurer, and is now in her second year in that position. "Many of us have similar situations, going through the stresses of balancing school with family and work, and when you are in academia at this level as a student of color, it's easy to feel a common bond," Garcia says. "Knowing that there are other students I can count on for support and encouragement is extremely valuable."

Indeed, many SCPH activities have nothing to do with recruitment of new students or outreach to the community, but are simply about enhancing the social and academic environment for current students. Members of SCPH have set up their own mentoring system in which new students are given guidance by second-years and second-years by doctoral students. Many alumni also continue to be active supporters, including Wright, whom Penniman continues to identify as a role model. "Mentoring is central to the cultures of many communities of color," Wright explains. "It's a part of who we are and what we do in the community, and it shouldn't stop once we get to the academic level."

"This is a group in which everyone cares about making sure that we all succeed," says Thomas. "I know that if I have a problem, these are the first people I'm going to go to for help or advice."

At the end of each academic year, a small celebration event is held for graduating students of color, allowing SCPH members to celebrate their achievements. Many of the SCPH members point to that event as an annual highlight – emblematic of the level of mutual support and the sense that they and their peers are on to something important.

"Whenever I feel overwhelmed," says Vincecia Garcia, "these are the people who inspire me."

"Students in SCPH are passionate about these issues because these are things that are happening in their community, not just things they're learning about."

—Angie Otiniano (below left)



"In public health we work toward social justice and making things more equitable. We think it's important to help shed light on what students can do in a way that will inspire them to go in and make a difference."

—Vincecia Garcia (above right)