Much has been written about the aging of the public health workforce. As discussed in an article by Hilary Heishman in the 2007 Fall/Winter issue of *Northwest Public Health*, with an average age of 47, many public health professionals will be retiring within the next 10 to 20 years. With rising chronic disease rates and the increasing recognition of the roles of social determinants of health, the need for public health to “assure conditions in which people can be healthy” as the Institute of Medicine defines it, has never been greater.

The 2000s may represent the start of a new wave in public health education with a rapid expansion in undergraduate courses, minors, and majors in public health. Workers with an undergraduate education in public health are not predicted to replace workers with graduate work in public health but may serve several functions. Exposure of students early in their careers to public health foundations may inspire them to continue graduate work in public health or allow them to take a population health perspective into clinical professions including nursing, medicine, dentistry or veterinary medicine. In addition, they may enter the workforce in non-health professions (such as the law or urban planning) carrying with them the foundations of population health and social determinants. Or they may enter the public health workforce in entry level positions with a background in public health.

There has been a rapid expansion in the number of colleges and universities offering undergraduate coursework, majors, or minors in the past 10 years, and growth is predicted to continue. A 2008 report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that 16 percent of its member institutions offered a major or minor in public health or a public-health-related field. The Association of Schools of Public Health found in 2010 that 29 of 38 Schools of Public Health responding to a 2010 survey had an undergraduate public health major, minor, or course work. Many of these programs began in the past 10 years. The 2010 survey reported 1,690 graduates with a major in public health. The Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) now includes criteria for accreditation for undergraduate programs.

What has led to this recent interest and expansion? Many factors have likely contributed. The Institute of Medicine’s 1988 report *The Future of Public Health* had a recommendation that Schools of Public Health should “help develop, or offer directly in their own universities, effective courses that expose undergraduates to concepts, history, current context, and techniques of public health to assist in the recruitment of able future leaders in the field.”

In 2007, the Educated Citizen and Public Health Initiative, supported by the Council of Colleges of Arts and Sciences, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Association of Schools of Public Health, and the Association for Prevention Teaching and Research further developed the concepts of expanding education for undergraduates with the aim to “bring undergraduate study of integrative public health to all institutions of higher education.” The Educated Citizen and Public Health
Initiative included guidelines for course development and design of public health majors and minors. And in 2011, the Association of Schools of Public Health held its first summit on undergraduate education, and plans for a second summit in 2012 are in place.

Undergraduates with an interest in health may now be exposed to public health within their first couple years at college. They are encouraged to wrestle with the complexities of how to improve the health of populations. Public health content is used as a forum to introduce critical thinking skills, problem solving, oral and written communication, application of social sciences, policy, ethics and social justice. A broad range of interdisciplinary coursework drawing from social sciences, natural sciences, quantitative methodology, policy, and communications, is enabling public health majors and minors across the country to become part of an educated citizenry who could become leaders in addressing the world’s current and future public health problems.

The University of Washington (UW) provides multiple opportunities for undergraduates to become engaged in public health. The Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences in the UW School of Public Health has offered a major and minor in environmental health since 1947. A health informatics and health information management evening degree major and post-baccalaureate certificate is available for students with interests in health information and patient data. A global health minor is a popular combination with other majors across campus. And, under rapid growth and development is the undergraduate public health major. Developed initially in early 2000 by faculty from the School of Public Health and housed within the College of Arts and Sciences individualized studies program, the major moved into the School of Public Health in March 2012.

Bringing the general public health major into the School of Public Health more closely links students, faculty, and staff to create a stronger sense of identity, connection, and mentoring. The program will continue its broad interdisciplinary approach with optional areas of focused study that include nutrition and global health.

What are the implications of development and expansion of undergraduate public health major? Since its inception, there have been 410 graduates from the University of Washington undergraduate public health program. Ninety-five graduates received Bachelor of Arts degrees and 315 received Bachelor of Science degrees. Complete data on outcomes for all graduates is not available but, as expected from a liberal arts degree, they range broadly. Systems for more formally tracking graduates into the future are being put in place.

It is often said that the young are our future, and involvement with undergraduate students certainly raises hope for that future. University of Washington public health students engage in the community; struggle with questions of fairness, ethics, structural violence, and advocacy; communicate with their peers; work in groups to solve problems—and reinvigorate the faculty working with them. Undergraduate students here (and across the country) have been some of the strongest advocates for expansion of undergraduate public health education and will be the best representatives to carry public health messaging into all aspects of their lives.