

What is an Academic Health Department (AHD)?

An academic health department is formed when an academic institution responsible for educating health professionals and a health department establish a formal partnership. The two organizations are joined in much the same way as a teaching hospital is linked to a medical school and the health department becomes known as an “academic” health department.

AHDs come in a variety of forms, and partnerships may involve sharing such activities as educating students and training professionals, providing community health services, and conducting research. Personnel and other resources may be shared to help make these collaborative activities possible.

How can an AHD help my community?

By supporting AHD development, you are supporting better health in your community. AHD partnerships strengthen the public health system, and a strong public health system helps protect the health of communities nationwide. AHD partnerships can help:

- Address community health needs more effectively
- Build practice-based evidence to support public health decision-making
- Maximize resource use, while increasing opportunities for obtaining additional resources
- Populate the public health workforce with better prepared health professions graduates
- Improve the potential for health professions graduates to enter the public health workforce
- Enhance education with real world examples and applications of public health practice
- Facilitate lifelong learning among public health professionals
- Meet accreditation standards for academic programs and health departments
- Increase awareness of the importance of public health

With a shrinking workforce, limited resources, and the continued push to do more with less, collaboration is the future for public health. Only with public health educators, service providers, and researchers all working together can we have the healthiest population.

How do I get started?

Communication and cooperation are key to developing a successful AHD. Champions within both the academic institution and health department are needed to build support for the AHD partnership. Stakeholders must buy into the value of an AHD for the partnership to be successful. Partnerships require time and patience to develop. Leaders and staff within the partnering organizations must understand each other’s work environment and culture and be willing to work together to strengthen the public health system in their community.

Extensive AHD partnerships do not appear overnight, but evolve over time. Taking a first step such as setting up student placements in the health department can lead to broader affiliations with joint appointments for staff, collaborative research projects, and shared resources.

Where can I get help?

The Academic Health Department Learning Community is here to help you as you work to build a strong AHD. Explore the AHD Learning Community online and learn more about AHDs by visiting <http://www.phf.org/programs/AHDLCL>. Still have questions? Contact Kathleen Amos at kamos@phf.org.

The Academic Health Department Learning Community is an initiative of the Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice, supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and staffed by the Public Health Foundation.