



**Sacred Heart University**

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**From the Selected Works of Jacqueline A. Vernarelli**

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## Public Health and Health Science Programs Receive \$1.5M Grant



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/jacqueline-vernarelli/35/>

# Public Health and Health Science Programs Receive \$1.5M Grant

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Funding will support new effort that aims to expand the public health workforce (photo not available)

Sacred Heart University has received a grant of nearly \$1.5 million for a new endeavor: the public health scholarship program to strengthen the emergency preparedness workforce. The three-year grant is from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration, and it went into effect on Sept. 30.

Jacqueline Vernarelli, director of SHU's public health graduate program (MPH) and co-director for research and education at the College of Health Professions, will serve as project director and principal investigator for the Pioneers of Public Health Scholarship Program. The team also includes Christina Gunther, assistant professor and chair of the health sciences department who will serve as co-director of the project, Sofia Pendley, assistant professor of public health, and Bronwyn Cross-Denny, associate professor of health science.

According to Vernarelli, the program "will provide 45 scholarships to fund the education of students over a three-year period. There are three scholarship options: the PioScholars program, which will provide full tuition for current public health professionals who already hold a bachelor's degree to return to earn an MPH; the PioHealth program, which provides tuition support for students pursuing a combined bachelor's in health sciences & MPH degree; and the PioPathway program for [undergraduate health science](#) students with [global health](#) or public health concentrations, from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds."

"For the first year, we are excited to offer scholarships to undergraduate health science students for PioPathway scholars," Gunther said.

The grant offers great benefits to SHU's students and the community, said Vernarelli. "It addresses two big goals: increasing the number of public health workers with specialized training in emergency preparedness and response,

and it also confronts public health inequities, specifically related to access to higher education. The scholarships will immensely improve students' access to our comprehensive public health training programs, enabling SHU to better serve the needs of our community partners, local and state health departments and our students. It also offers access to the MPH program and undergraduate education in the health science program.

“The program will allow current public health professionals to enroll in the University’s MPH program at no cost to further their education, and it will deepen their knowledge and training in public health—something that is highly beneficial to our communities. The program will be a catalyst to enhance partnerships between Sacred Heart University and local and state health departments, as well as other public health-related agencies and organizations,” Vernarelli noted.

She said the program will also provide funding to train the next generation of public health workers—undergraduate health science students interested in working in the sector—by engaging them early in their training.

“The COVID-19 pandemic put a magnifying glass on the challenges our public health system faces and our need for highly trained public health professionals,” said Pendley. “This grant will not only bolster our ability to respond to future pandemics but will make an MPH and undergraduate health science degree with a focus in public health attainable for students who may not have previously had the opportunity. Students will have the opportunity to practice their skills and respond to public health threats as members of our Sacred Heart University Medical Reserve Corps. It is an honor to be on this team.”

“We are now seeing the effects of the pandemic in mental health issues as well,” said Cross-Denny, who is a licensed clinical social worker. “The opportunity to train more public health professionals to address population needs at the onset can prevent further health and mental health problems especially in times of crisis. I am thrilled to be working with my colleagues as we offer this opportunity for students to prepare them to serve our communities.”

“The project provides an innovative strategy to address public health workforce shortages that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic while providing specialized training in emergency preparedness,” Vernarelli added.

SHU is well positioned to succeed in achieving its program goals, Vernarelli said. “Our team is especially committed to providing students with the training needed to address local and regional health disparities. The MPH program at SHU has a proven track record of training graduates who go on to become successful leaders in public health. We are delighted to increase the program’s training reach.”

Gunther added, “Since we added the public health and global health concentrations in 2017, we have prepared our graduates to successfully enroll in MPH programs and entry-level positions in the field of public health. This grant will make the possibility more accessible to a larger group of students.”

Additionally, the program aligns well with Sacred Heart’s mission. “Rooted in the theory of social justice, our innovative training program truly prepares students to make a difference in our community, both personally and professionally,” Vernarelli said. “SHU can make a meaningful impact on local and regional public health workforce shortages. By funding students’ education, the scholarship program will enable SHU to produce graduates ready to tackle the most pressing issues in public health.”

*Pictured, from top left clockwise, are Professors Bronwyn Cross-Denny, Jacqueline Vernarelli, Sofia Pendley and Christina Gunther (photo not available)*