



GILLINGS SCHOOL OF  
GLOBAL PUBLIC HEALTH

# Impact Report 2024

A complement to *Carolina Public Health* magazine



**Dean:** Nancy Messonnier, MD

**Associate Dean for Communications and  
Marketing:** Matthew Chamberlin

**Managing Editor:** Meg Palmer

**Design and Production:** [AdrialDesigns.com](http://AdrialDesigns.com)

**Send correspondence to:**

UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health  
Communications and Marketing  
Campus Box 7400, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7400  
or email [sphcomm@unc.edu](mailto:sphcomm@unc.edu).

*350 copies of this document were printed  
at a cost of \$3,285 or \$9.39 per copy.*

This impact report is published by the UNC Gillings  
School of Global Public Health, 135 Dauer Dr., Campus  
Box 7400, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,  
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7400. November 2024.

**PICTURED ON COVER:**

- Top left: Gillings students represent the school to visitors during the annual Practicum Day event.
- Top right: Spring 2024 graduates celebrate during the Gillings Gala.
- Bottom left: Paige Schmadeke and a collaborator work in the BioSpecimen Processing Facility.
- Middle right: Dean Nancy Messonnier receives her COVID-19 vaccine during a Fall 2024 UNC vaccine clinic.
- Bottom right: New BSPH graduates celebrate during the Spring 2024 commencement ceremony.

<b>2</b>	From the Dean
<b>4</b>	Our curriculum is growing
<b>6</b>	Academics
<b>8</b>	Staff Profile: Claudio Andrés Cáceres Araya
<b>9</b>	Practice
<b>10</b>	Research
<b>12</b>	Global Health
<b>14</b>	Innovation
<b>16</b>	Student practicum work at our Partnership Hubs
<b>18</b>	Center for Artificial Intelligence and Public Health (CAIPH)
<b>20</b>	CDC Regional Center for Public Health Preparedness and Response (PHPR)
<b>22</b>	Addressing maternal health warning signs among WIC participants
<b>24</b>	Meet new Gillings faculty
<b>26</b>	Why I chose Gillings
<b>30</b>	The Pivot: Jonathan Earnest
<b>32</b>	Communications and Marketing
<b>34</b>	Welcome: Mary Margaret Carroll
<b>35</b>	Advancement
<b>36</b>	Volunteer Board Chairs

*“This year’s Impact Report is a testament to our excellence in research, teaching and practice, as well as our commitment to the state and community that support us.”*

# From the Dean

As I approach my third year as dean, I continue to be inspired by the innovation and achievements of our Gillings School community. Every day brings a new moment of discovery and pride, whether from meeting a new student in the hallway, reading a publication from our researchers or attending a meeting with the dedicated staff who work behind the scenes to help the Gillings School flourish.

This year’s Impact Report is a testament to our excellence in research, teaching and practice, as well as our commitment to the state and community that support us. It also focuses on our dedication to fostering better health through a supportive and inclusive environment – both inside and outside the School.

While this report highlights the broad achievements that make us a leader in



academics and research, it also features our efforts to strengthen community in public health. We’ve welcomed new leadership, added talented faculty, expanded student wellness services, broadened our curriculum and launched training for more inclusive classroom discussions.

We are especially proud to remain the No. 1 *public* school of public health in the United States. That honor would not be possible without the hard work and dedication of everyone who cares about public health at Carolina – students, faculty, staff, alumni and donors.

I couldn’t be prouder to call Chapel Hill home and to see the collective impact of our work in this community and beyond. 🏡

**Nancy Messonnier, MD**

Dean and Bryson Distinguished Professor in Public Health

## Welcome to our new department chairs!



**Alessandra Bazzano, PhD, MPH**

Chair of Maternal and Child Health



**Vaughn Upshaw, DrPH, EdD**

Chair of Public Health Leadership and Practice



**Rebecca Fry, PhD**

Chair of Environmental Sciences and Engineering



**Maria Gallo, PhD**

Chair of Epidemiology

### COMING SOON

## A new Faculty and Staff Affairs unit

This year, the Gillings School began development of a new Faculty and Staff Affairs (FSA) unit, which will support recruitment, retention and professional development; foster a more inclusive and engaged community; and serve as a connector and support network for faculty and staff.

A team led by **Mark Holmes, PhD**, professor of health policy and management and Lambeth Distinguished Chair in Public Policy, has developed a blueprint for the new unit that aims to achieve the following goals:

- **Leverage all available resources:** FSA will coordinate and promote opportunities and connect Gillings School people to University and UNC System resources for professional development and support.
- **Career advancement:** FSA will organize or develop workshops and advising for faculty (appointments, promotions and tenure) and staff (career pathway workshops and advisement).
- **Training and development:** FSA will organize or develop tailored training programs, best teaching practices and leadership development for faculty and staff.

- **Operational excellence:** FSA will offer or coordinate programming to enhance team dynamics, supervision and performance management.
- **Well-being:** FSA will provide or coordinate programs addressing physical, mental, financial, emotional, social and spiritual health.
- **Community building:** FSA will spearhead recognition and celebration of contributions, engagement opportunities and effective team dynamics.

This new unit exemplifies our commitment to the people at Gillings who help train future leaders in public health, and we are so excited for its launch. 🏡

# Our curriculum is *growing*



Students interact during a class at the Gillings School.

The Gillings School of Global Public Health is excited to present new program offerings and training opportunities for students, faculty and staff.

## BSPH Program in Community and Global Public Health

The mission of the Bachelor of Science in Public Health (BSPH) program in Community and Global Public Health is to prepare students to work in partnership with local and global communities to identify and address health problems to achieve health equity.

The curriculum emphasizes equity-centered and high-impact practices such as team-based learning and experiential education and will offer more specialized training in data-driven community and systems-based public health.

The program is designed to build upon student interest in understanding the systems and behaviors that contribute to public health challenges such as climate change, water crises and the opioid epidemic. To address health behaviors, public health professionals must learn how to engage with communities in both local and global settings to identify public health threats and creative, community-driven solutions.

Students can begin applying this fall for the new BSPH program. The first class of students will start in August 2025.

## Healthcare Management Certificate

The Department of Health Policy and Management (HPM) will soon offer a new Healthcare Management Certificate, an 11-credit program over 12-15 months that provides core health management competencies for emerging health care leaders. Participants will develop skills in understanding, measuring and leading successful health care units at levels appropriate to their career stage. For those without previous master's level training, certificates may also meet core requirements for the Residential or Executive Master of Healthcare Administration degrees offered by the HPM department.

## Programs to support community wellness, facilitate difficult conversations

In addition to these two new curriculum offerings, the School now offers training and events to facilitate difficult conversations and support wellness among the Gillings community.

Events on campus and in our state, including the recent gun violence on campus and the devastation caused by Hurricane Helene, have led us to develop an inward-focused goal of supporting mental health among Gillings faculty, staff and students. The School has hosted several support gatherings that provide space for participants to share experiences and reflect in a respectful, compassionate environment.

As part of a broader conversation on addressing difficult topics, the School

now offers several training programs, including the Heels for Healing and Restoration dialogue program, the Crash Communication Course, the Teaching and Learning Community of Care opportunity ([go.unc.edu/tlcc](http://go.unc.edu/tlcc)), and the Teaching in Challenging Times workshops and resources ([go.unc.edu/tictresources](http://go.unc.edu/tictresources)). Each of these unique activities provides faculty and staff with opportunities to focus on intergroup dialogue and difficult conversations, with trainings specifically designed for faculty and staff from the Gillings School.

The UNC Center for Faculty Excellence ([cfe.unc.edu](http://cfe.unc.edu)) also offers programming to support faculty development, including asynchronous resources and events for teaching in challenging times and other leadership, teaching and mentoring resources. [📖](#)



# Shaping tomorrow's public health leaders



**Laura Linnan, ScD**  
Senior Associate Dean, Academic and Student Affairs

This year, the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health has maintained strong enrollment numbers and rigorous academic courses, allowing us to retain our position as the number one public school of public health in the country and ensuring readiness for Council on Education for Public Health reaccreditation.

Based on student feedback, we strengthened the School's faculty mentoring efforts by recognizing excellent faculty mentors from each department and organizing a comprehensive workshop to showcase best practices on faculty mentoring. These best practices and helpful strategies will be documented in a "Toolkit for Effective Faculty Mentoring," available in 2025. We also plan to incorporate information from The Graduate School on this topic.

We have hired an experienced instructional faculty member, **Yesenia Merino, PhD, MPH**, to provide departments with technical assistance and support as they co-create priority plans to strengthen the curriculum around topics related to anti-racism, health equity and inclusive excellence.

We support continuous quality improvement efforts for the schoolwide Master of Public Health (MPH) core and concentrations. We are also offering two immersion experiences for MPH@UNC to help online students develop a sense of shared community with our residential faculty, students and staff.

The Student Affairs unit continues to leverage the Student Mental Health and Well-Being Task Force, which provides guidance in structuring the resources and environment at the School to reduce student stress and support mental health and well-being. The task force uses the "Eight Dimensions of Wellness" framework to address all aspects of well-being.

Student Affairs, in partnership with Gillings Instructional and Information Systems and Academic Affairs, also utilizes the Gillings Navigate platform, launched last year, to strengthen the connection between students, academic coordinators and University resources. Students can use Gillings Navigate to connect with their academic coordinator, network with other students who want to form study groups, or learn next steps to set up appointments with career services, mental health counseling and wellness coaching at UNC. We believe students, staff and faculty can all benefit from this technological improvement.

The unit also continues to recruit and engage with prospective students, in particular partnering with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and high schools to educate and motivate toward careers in public health. 📖



Students enrolled in Fall 2024 term

# 2,143

## 52%

North Carolina residents

## 40%

Domestic students from non-white communities

## 12.9%

International students

## 25%

Distance learners

## 23%

Domestic students from underrepresented non-white communities

## 40%

Domestic MPH@UNC students from underrepresented non-white communities

## Numbers at a glance

As a leader in public health education, the Gillings School cultivates a thriving environment with dedicated faculty, diverse programs and practical training experiences that equip students for successful careers in the field.

Graduates with a job or continuing education

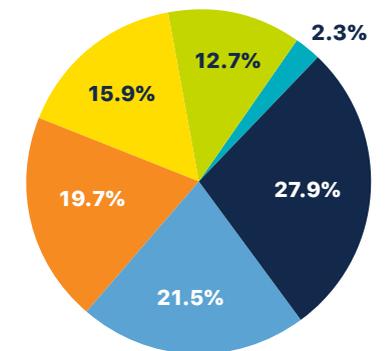
# 98%

Graduates/year

# 939

### Graduates employed by:

- For-profit organizations
- Academic institutions
- Health care organizations
- Nonprofit organizations
- Government agencies
- Other



### Gillings MPH practicum

The Gillings MPH practicum gives students an opportunity to use their training in a professional public health setting.

**370+** Number of students who completed practica in AY23-24

**750+** Number of practicum products produced in AY23-24

**224+** Number of practicum partner organizations in AY23-24



U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy gave the commencement speech at the Gillings School's Spring 2024 commencement ceremony.

## 47%

Percentage of AY23-24 practica that primarily benefited people in N.C.

## 68%

Percentage of AY23-24 practica that primarily benefited historically excluded populations



# Araya joins Gillings community as embedded counselor

The Gillings School is excited to welcome Claudio Andrés Cáceres Araya, MSW, LCSW, who provides therapy services to students at the Gillings School as part of UNC’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) Embedded Counselor Program.

Cáceres was born and raised in Santiago, Chile, and moved to the United States in 2009. As a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, he has worked with diverse communities and organizations in both countries. He has practiced clinical social work since 2014, including working with the University of North Carolina-Greensboro Counseling and Psychological Services for several years.

In addition to his experience working as a therapist with university students, Cáceres earned his Master of Social Work from the UNC School of Social Work in 2013, which provided him with a firsthand perspective of being a student at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Cáceres is excited for his new position as an embedded counselor because he is highly accessible for Gillings students, both in terms of proximity and



availability, and he is able to understand and focus on the specific needs and concerns of Gillings students.

Students can make appointments with Cáceres by reaching out to him via email (caceresa@unc.edu), with the choice of remote or in-person appointments depending on individual preference. He is a generalist counselor, which allows him to work with students on a wide range of issues, and he offers services in both Spanish and English. Furthermore, Cáceres can work with students in an ongoing capacity or can refer students to other therapists, depending on each student’s needs.

“It’s an honor to be a counselor at UNC,” Cáceres says. “I can help out students just like people helped me in the past. Everyone is welcome to come to me — this is ultimately a safe space for all students. I’m eager to get to know people here at Gillings so that we can work together as a team.”

Outside of his work, Cáceres enjoys soccer, outdoor activities, and playing with his kids and pets.

Scroll to the “Counseling” section on the Gillings School’s Student Resources webpage to learn more about the embedded counselor program. [📄](#)

# Our commitment to communities



**John Wiesman, DrPH, MPH**  
Associate Dean for Practice

The Gillings School is in the second year of our six-year strategic plan for practice. We are actively taking steps to achieve our goals of elevating practice, engaging communities and pursuing our vision of creating a healthier North Carolina while also advancing health globally.

**Highlights from our work in practice:**

- The School has been selected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to be the **Public Health Emergency and Response coordinating center for Region 4**. During the next five years, the team will implement the work plan they created and serve as a resource for training, strategy and technical assistance to public health agencies in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. (Read more on pages 20-21.)
- The **Public Health Partnership Hubs** have launched in Cumberland, Durham, Halifax and Jackson counties. Through these Hubs, we are working alongside community members to achieve their desired community outcomes by embedding students, faculty and staff. Community Hub Coordinators have been hired to work in each of the counties and serve as a connector between local organizations and the School. We are excited to welcome them to the team!
  - » **Kelsey White, MA** (Durham County Hub Coordinator)

- » **Katie Hutchinson** (Jackson County Hub Coordinator)
- » **Kelby Hicks** (Halifax County Hub Coordinator)
- » **Nicole Beckwith** (Cumberland County Hub Coordinator)
- Four Gillings students have already completed their practica through the Hubs as we continue to build new partnerships and strengthen existing relationships in the counties. (Read more on pages 16-17.)
- Leaders and staff from nonprofit research institute RTI International hosted students, faculty and staff from the Gillings School for the annual “PHield Trip” on February 27, 2024. RTI’s University Collaboration Office welcomed 80 students, faculty and staff to share their public health research experiences and some early-career tips.
- Meetings with the Practice Advisory Committee and Practice Coordinating Committee are ongoing and continue to support the vision of elevating practice within the School and creating a stronger public health workforce.
- In the next year, the practice unit has set goals to meet with a newly established funding work group, further integrate students, faculty and staff into the work of the hubs and continue to advocate for academic health departments across North Carolina. [📄](#)

Hours of practice-based activities in FY24

21,848

Student-faculty collaborations in FY24

233

Community-based practice activities in FY24

338



# Transforming public health through research



**Kari North, PhD**

Associate Dean  
for Research

Researchers at the Gillings School strive to find answers to pressing public health problems across a wide range of disciplines. We continue to engage in collaborative, interdisciplinary projects across many topics, including infectious disease preparedness, aging, climate change and health, mental health, and artificial intelligence in public health.

**To extend our research impact and reach, we developed an ambitious six-year strategic plan that aims to:**

- Strengthen our research infrastructure;
- Better support collaboration and community engagement;
- Create a more inclusive, supportive research environment; and
- Accelerate and communicate our impact with other researchers and academic institutions, prospective students and key constituents, such as practitioners, community members, funders, legislators and policy makers, and the media.

We have embarked on the implementation of this plan through partnerships with members from across the Gillings School community to achieve our goal of improving our direct public health action through our research.

**Examples of recently funded projects include:**

- Mapping the Causal Genetic-Imaging-Clinical Pathway for Alzheimer's Disease – PI: Hongtu Zhu, BIOS; funded by the National Institute on Aging, \$2,151,878
- Assessment of Ambient Air Pollution Associated with Wood-Pellet Manufacturing – PI: Will Vizuete, ESE; funded by the Environmental Defense Fund, \$333,612

- Integrating Molecular Pathology, Radiology and Genetics to Improve Breast Cancer Risk Prediction – PI: Melissa Troester, EPID; funded by the Department of Defense, \$3,863,892
- A complex systems approach to understand the impacts of neighborhood development on physical activity in Latine and Black communities – PI: Natalicio Serrano, HB; funded by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, \$260,000
- Evaluating a remotely delivered, digital health colorectal cancer screening intervention among racially diverse patients of a community health center – PI: Leah Frerichs, HPM; funded by the National Cancer Institute, \$1,228,290
- Enhancing HIV prevention and reducing alcohol use among people receiving STI care in Malawi: An HIV status neutral approach – PI: Angela Parcesepe, MCH; funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, \$424,221
- Building a Real-World Evidence Base for Continuous Glucose Monitoring in Older Adults with Diabetes – PI: Anna Kahkoska, NUTR; funded by the National Institute on Aging, \$520,988



Above: Two students discuss research at a Spring 2024 poster presentation. Left: Graduate student Rokhaya Kane conducts a cooking class in Zanzibar.

- Region 4 Center for Public Health Preparedness and Response – PI: John Wiesman, HPM; funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, \$773,000. (Read more on page 9.)
- Recognizing & Addressing Maternal Warning Signs for Morbidity & Mortality During Pregnancy & the Postpartum Period – PI: Dorothy Cilenti and Christine Tucker, MCH; funded by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, \$5,000,000. (Read more on page 22.)

School-administered funding  
**\$113.4M**  
(FY24; 3% from state funds)

Number of awards  
**484**  
(2023-24)

Funding per faculty PI  
**\$1.1M**

Total grants and contracts awarded to school faculty  
**\$204M**

# Global impact, local impact



**Suzanne Maman, PhD**  
Associate Dean for Global Health

We are a global public health school because we believe public health transcends borders. In our interconnected world, diseases and health challenges do not stop at national borders.

Our faculty and researchers work to address public health issues in diverse settings, applying what they learn in one context to inform solutions in another. Public health and clinical interventions developed by our faculty internationally have been adapted to meet the needs of United States communities and vice versa. We train our students with skills and tools to work in diverse settings, ensuring they can address complex health challenges wherever they arise. Our definition of global health includes addressing the health needs of global populations within the U.S., such as refugees and immigrants. By addressing public health issues both locally and globally, we advance well-being for all.

## Global-Local Impact Spotlight

**Michael Kosorok, PhD**, W.R. Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Professor in biostatistics, is leading the newly launched Center for Artificial Intelligence and Public Health (CAIPH). (Read more on pages 18-19.) Kosorok has been working with **Jeff Stringer, MD, FACOG**, professor at the UNC School of Medicine, on a landmark study that highlights the importance of global public health research on local public health. The study, conducted in North Carolina and Zambia, paves the way for universal obstetric ultrasound. The technology utilized in the study suggests high-quality pregnancy care can be accessible to all women regardless of their location or resources available, locally or globally.

## Training Impact Spotlight

### Partners Investing in Students

We are proud to celebrate 20 years of partnership with FHI 360 through the FHI 360-UNC Gillings Graduate Research Fellowship. This collaboration has trained 48 Gillings graduate students, preparing them for impactful careers in global public health. FHI 360 has generously contributed over \$1.5 million exclusively to Gillings students to invest in their public health education through tuition support, health insurance, student fees and stipends. The yearlong fellowship provides our graduate students with invaluable real-world experience, allowing them to apply classroom knowledge while receiving mentorship from FHI's esteemed researchers. These mentorship relationships often evolve into lasting professional connections. The benefits to both institutions extend beyond the fellowship, with six former fellows currently employed at FHI 360 and two serving as faculty members at the Gillings School.

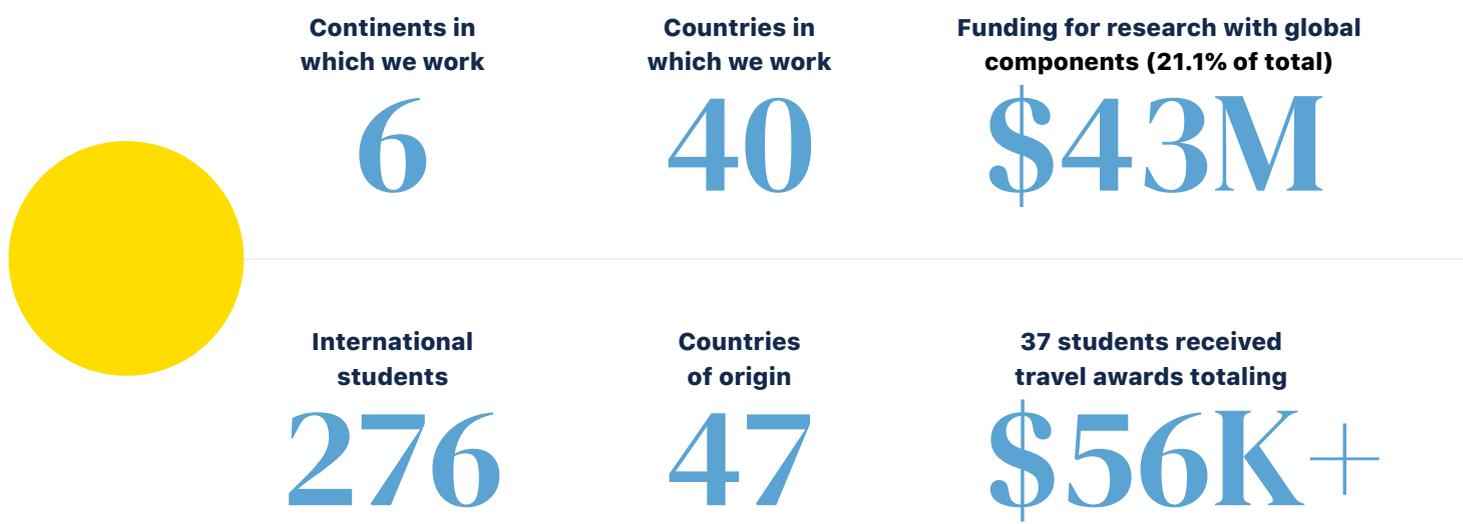
### Donors Investing in Students

Thanks to generous donor support, we offered three Pre-Dissertation Travel Awards to doctoral students. The awards help Gillings doctoral students travel internationally to do preliminary explorations of potential research materials and sites in preparation for writing a dissertation. This funding is crucial in allowing our doctoral students to travel, make connections and relationship-build with people in-person.

- **Ting Chen** (MCH) is traveling to Nigeria to conduct preliminary explorations for her dissertation on enhancing health service coverage estimates and program monitoring and evaluation in Nigeria.
- **Emilia Goland** (MCH) is traveling to Ghana to explore opportunities to conduct research focusing on young people's use and perceptions of self-care interventions for sexual and reproductive health.
- **Sara Lebu** (ESE) traveled to Kenya to pilot research investigating the feasibility of a low-burden assessment approach to understand the impact of flooding on sanitation infrastructure and fecal contamination in the environment in low-resource settings.
- **Aparna Kachoria**, doctoral student, and **Prajwol Nepal**, doctoral alumnus, completed an evaluation report with Alight, a global humanitarian response organization in Sudan. Alight was primarily interested in a mixed-methods evaluation to better understand patient and staff perspectives on the services provided and received. However, due to the ongoing conflict, Alight shifted the focus of the work to look at evaluation priorities in the midst of acute conflict. The team worked to ensure the shift still allowed them to answer questions that Alight originally posed. The resulting evaluation report is also helping Alight with goal setting for the immediate future.
- **Quintin Van Dyk, MPH**, global health alumnus, developed data dashboards for Casa Alitas, a humanitarian aid program committed to assisting asylum-seekers released in Tucson, Arizona. The dashboards show demographic data of asylum seekers arriving at California's shelters, including what countries they are coming from, what languages they speak, where they are heading in the U.S., how large their families are, gender and age. These dashboards help the state to more easily analyze and view their data when putting together reports for funders and county/state/federal officials. 📊

## Practice Impact Spotlight

The Gillings Humanitarian Health Initiative (HHI), in collaboration with and support of partnering organizations and collaborators, works to address multiple and diverse humanitarian situations. The HHI leadership and student interns have made an impact in several countries and territories, working with organizations and universities this past year in Gaza, Nicaragua, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Syria and the U.S. A few highlights of the projects follow:



# Helping public health innovation thrive



**Anne Glauber, MPH**  
Associate Director of Innovation

The Gillings School is committed to building a culture of innovation, entrepreneurship and translation for impact in public health.

## Experiential Learning for Student Innovators

- The **Gillings Entrepreneurs of Color Mentorship Program** provides Gillings students the chance to work with alumni mentors, pairing eight emerging entrepreneurs each year. Through monthly sessions, mentors help students refine their goals and strategies for success. Feedback from mentees showed strong agreement that the program equipped them with the skills and insights needed to implement their innovative ideas and entrepreneurial ambitions.
- In the **Map the System Competition**, co-sponsored with Innovate Carolina and Oxford University, students tackle complex social and environmental issues through a systems perspective. This year, 45 students (36% from Gillings) across 11 teams participated, with the winning team, *Breaking the Silence: Navigating the Untold Story of Women's Reproductive Health*, representing UNC at the global summit in Banff in May 2024.
- The third biannual **Gillings School Pitch Competition** this fall encourages students to channel their knowledge and innovative spirit into impactful solutions, often marking their first foray into entrepreneurship. Finalists will compete for top prizes: First place (\$3,000 + \$5,000 in consulting services from BlueDoor Consulting), second place (\$1,500), third place (\$750) and People's Choice (\$200).

## Making an Impact

- **CollectiveGood**, led by **Sean Sylvia, PhD** (HPM), has developed a minimum viable product of their platform which harnesses collective clinical intelligence to power medical AI testing and validation. They plan to pursue small business technology transfer (STTR) funding to test the platform with an initial group of clinicians in the United States and Africa.
- **Couplet Care Inc.**, a UNC spin-out, has brought to market their innovative infant bassinet, developed in part by Gillings School faculty **Catherine Sullivan, MPH** (MCH), and **Alison Stuebe, MD, MSc** (MCH). The device is now available for sale in the U.S., marking a significant step forward in the team's mission to improve patient safety, clinical efficiency and health outcomes for mothers and newborns. The Couplet Care team is now focused on meeting demand and is well poised for continued growth. *For more information, please explore [coupletcare.com](http://coupletcare.com).*
- **LuxBiome**, newly formed in May 2024 by **Kun Lu, PhD** (ESE), focuses on developing a novel microbiome-based solution to protect against arsenic. Lu is moving through next steps, including patent application, customer discovery and funding mechanisms to further validate the technology.
- The **Sorbenta** team, led by **Orlando Coronell, PhD** (ESE), and **Frank Leibfarth, PhD**, were recently awarded a National Institutes of Health (NIH) STTR Phase I award. They are currently finalizing a licensing agreement from

UNC for their patented sorbent material. Once finalized, the budding business will move into Kickstart Venture Services Accelerator lab space and begin work on the newly funded NIH STTR award.

- **SNP Therapeutics, Inc.**, a genomic testing company with a focus on precision nutrition is leveraging their informed AI process to develop algorithms to identify subpopulations with specific genetic signatures that are predisposed to health issues and disease. Founded by **Steven Zeisel, MD, PhD** (NUTR), the company has launched their first test and nutrition line of products (Genate) in the prenatal health category. They are conducting further research and development on tests and therapeutics for male factor infertility, fatty liver (MASLD) and muscle wasting (sarcopenia).
- **Abbey Hatcher, PhD** (HB), wrote a United Nations policy brief on innovative technologies and systems-level strategies to reduce partner violence.

## Emerging Technologies

- **Joe Brown, PhD** (ESE), filed a provisional patent for a novel biomarker for gut inflammation, a non-invasive tool to help physicians treat inflammatory bowel disease.

- **Rebecca Fry, PhD** (ESE), is developing a GIS data-agnostic data visualization tool that integrates multiple complex geospatial datasets in a user-friendly manner. Her team completed the National Science Foundation National I-Corps customer discovery program, focusing on market potential for the tool.
- **Lindsey Smith Taillie, PhD** (NUTR), is developing an AI-powered online supermarket to help consumers make healthier choices more easily, optimize diets for health and disease prevention, and save consumers time and cognitive effort.

## Gillings Innovation Labs (GILs)

GILs fund disruptive, innovative solutions to urgent public health problems. In December 2023, the most recent round, *Harnessing Generative AI in Public Health*, awarded six projects from six Gillings School departments. Along with several campus partners and external collaborators, they are kickstarting solutions to important public health problems: cervical cancer screening in Malawi, decision-making around HIV treatment, modeling for brain-related disorders, behavior change for weight management, poor air quality and standard of primary care in marginalized populations globally. [i](#)



by Ethan Chupp, UNC Gillings School Communications Fellow

# Gillings students build local public health connections through new Partnership Hubs

The UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health's new Public Health Partnership Hubs allow students to turn their classwork into real-world change.

Beginning in 2023, the Partnership Hubs represent a model for long-term collaborative partnership with local North Carolina communities, which is one of the goals identified in the Gillings School's strategic plan for practice ([gillings-projects.unc.edu/plan/practice](https://gillings-projects.unc.edu/plan/practice)).

Located in Cumberland, Durham, Halifax and Jackson Counties, the hubs span the state's diverse geography. Through these hubs, the Gillings School aims to embed students, faculty and staff to work alongside community members to achieve their desired community outcomes. This summer, four Master of Public Health (MPH) students completed their practica through three of the hubs at county public health departments. Their projects are wide-ranging, from tracking opioid overdose reversals to creating data briefs for community health improvement plans.

**Ryan Bostic** worked with the Jackson County Department of Public Health, consolidating Narcan opioid reversal data into an innovative mapping tool that tracks overdoses and successful reversals. The hubs allow students to link their public health interests with professional experience.

"It was my background in statistics and my interest in substance use that brought me to public health," said Bostic, an MPH student in the Gillings/UNC-Asheville Place-Based Health concentration. "And here, I'm not just an intern; I'm kind of treated as a peer."

The opioid crisis has strained the resources of rural counties like Jackson. One overdose call may require as many as 10 responders from the police department, fire department and emergency medical services. Bostic is hopeful that this project can show that the availability of Narcan has driven down the number of overdose calls in Jackson County and the number of personnel needed to respond.

"If Narcan is saving the county money, that can help even more people get behind it," said Bostic.

**Albert Chow** also worked with the public health department in Jackson County on a communications campaign focused on suicide prevention. Like Bostic, the hub helped him bring his public health interests into practice. The first part of this campaign was a survey of first responders in the county to gauge interest in local suicide prevention training.

"This project came from my experience training as an EMT, seeing how mental health emergencies get treated. Some calls required more debriefing than others and would benefit from a more cohesive, integrated response across the department," said Chow, an MPH student in the Gillings/UNC-Asheville Place-Based Health concentration.

Chow also developed communication materials for county residents influenced by the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. The campaign aims to inform the public about mental health resources available in Jackson County. Chow discussed drawing on the experience of other counties, including neighboring Haywood County. Through the hub, Chow has been impressed with the collaborations central to public health.



(Left) Albert Chow restocks the Sylva Support Stop. Sylva is a town in central Jackson County, N.C.

(Below) Ryan Bostic, right, works alongside fellow practicum student Amber Chapman.



"Nobody operates on their own, because together we're much more successful in the outcomes that we hope to achieve," said Chow.

The Gillings School is making a five-to-ten-year commitment to each of these hub locations to help them make the sustainable changes they care about. With this ongoing commitment, the School can help communities take something from concept to implementation to evaluation and to improvement with sequential student practicum projects and faculty technical assistance.

"Being the number one *public* school of public health in a state that ranks 32nd in terms of health makes this initiative particularly important. Gillings School students, faculty and staff can be a helpful resource in our own backyard. Improving

community health and giving our students hands-on experience is a win-win, and we hope these experiences will entice our students to work here long-term," said **John Wiesman, DrPH**, associate dean for practice at the Gillings School, whose team spearheaded the creation of the Partnership Hubs.

The Partnership Hubs are relatively new. As these partnerships build, more students will explore their interests and test out future careers. The hubs will continue to build long-standing relationships between the Gillings School and health departments statewide, driving positive change in public health practice. 📄

This is a shortened version of this full article: [sph.unc.edu/sph-news/gillings-students-build-local-public-health-connections-through-new-partnership-hubs](https://sph.unc.edu/sph-news/gillings-students-build-local-public-health-connections-through-new-partnership-hubs)

# New Gillings School center will leverage AI for improved public health

The UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health has launched the Center for Artificial Intelligence and Public Health (CAIPH), a new initiative focused on the future of artificial intelligence (AI) at the Gillings School.

CAIPH will serve as a hub for innovation, where ideas are cultivated, tested and implemented to improve population health outcomes using AI-driven approaches in North Carolina and globally. It aims to address pressing global health challenges using AI; draw on the School's interdisciplinary expertise in public health, bioinformatics, biostatistics, epidemiology and computer science; and empower outstanding interdisciplinary AI research that optimizes public health.

In particular, the center will focus on the use of AI to solve challenges related to climate and environmental health, health behavior, health policy and economics, and precision public health. Researchers at the center will work closely with collaborators across UNC-Chapel Hill, including the UNC School of Data Science and Society.

"There are vital issues in public health that could benefit from the support of AI," said Dean **Nancy Messonnier, MD**, Bryson Distinguished Professor in Public Health, "and through this

center, we want to encourage their exploration with the ultimate goal of accelerating research and improving health outcomes locally and globally."

"The Gillings School already has emerging excellence in scholarship leveraging AI to improve public health," said **Kari North, PhD**, associate dean for research. "We are excited to assemble that talent at the school in this center to further foster UNC's footprint in AI."

The Gillings School has several exciting projects in AI that are already transforming health locally. **Will Vizquete, PhD**, professor in environmental sciences and engineering and the Gillings School's first innovation strategy adviser, is leading research using AI to provide fast and accurate air quality information to the citizens of N.C. — a project that can help prevent poor air quality-related morbidity and mortality in the state.

Last year, the School also awarded Gillings Innovation Labs funding to six faculty members using generative AI to solve multidisciplinary public health challenges, including cervical cancer screening in Malawi, decision-making around HIV treatment, modeling for brain-related disorders, behavior change for weight management, poor air quality and standards of primary care in marginalized populations around the world.

CAIPH will be led by **Michael Kosorok, PhD**, W.R. Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Professor in biostatistics. In his own research, Kosorok has been working with **Jeff Stringer, MD, FACOG**, professor at the UNC

School of Medicine, to use AI to accurately predict gestational age with inexpensive ultrasounds that can be used by sonographers in under-resourced settings with only brief training.

"I am thrilled and humbled to lead this new center," Kosorok said. "I look forward to collaborating with my associates in the Gillings School to increase the use of AI to solve public health challenges and to advance AI use in health research."

"We are immensely proud of the strong reputation the Gillings School has in data science and biostatistics," said **Michael Hudgens, PhD**, professor and chair of the Department of

Biostatistics. "Our expertise in these fields is a cornerstone of the new Center for AI and Public Health. By leveraging our advanced analytical capabilities and innovative research, we are poised to make significant contributions to public health through the application of artificial intelligence. This center will not only enhance our understanding of complex health data but also drive impactful solutions to global health challenges." 📄

For more information, please visit [sph.unc.edu/resource-pages/caiph](https://sph.unc.edu/resource-pages/caiph).



## Spotlight: Michael Kosorok, PhD

Kosorok is leading the new Center for Artificial Intelligence and Public Health (CAIPH) at the Gillings School. He brings extensive expertise in biostatistics, machine learning and precision medicine. His groundbreaking research includes using AI to predict gestational age with minimal resources, helping to improve health outcomes in under-resourced settings. As the center director, Kosorok aims to advance AI applications in public health, fostering collaboration and innovation to address pressing health challenges globally.



*The Center for Artificial Intelligence and Public Health (CAIPH) is a hub for innovation aimed at using AI-driven approaches to improve population health outcomes locally and globally.*

# Gillings School to lead regional CDC center for public health preparedness and response

The UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, in collaboration with the North Carolina Institute for Public Health (NCIPH), has received a five-year grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to establish a Regional Center for Public Health Preparedness and Response (PHPR), with the goal of enhancing public health preparedness and response across the southeastern United States. This center is one of ten centers serving the entire country to support the uptake of evidence-based strategies that strengthen public health emergency preparedness and response nationwide.

The center will serve as a focused resource for training, strategy and technical assistance to public health agencies and their partners in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee in order to bolster the capabilities of state, tribal and local health departments, as well as community-led public health partners.

The coronavirus pandemic put immense stress on public health systems in the U.S., which are mostly decentralized and vary in access to the resources, data analysis, staffing and expertise that are critical to swift emergency responses. The new PHPR centers are part of the CDC's effort to collaborate with agencies and improve the safeguards, resources, response plans and communications necessary to mitigate harm and health inequities in the event of another disease outbreak or natural disaster.

**John Wiesman, DrPH**, associate dean for practice at the Gillings School, will serve as director for the center, along with co-director **John Wallace, PhD, MSPH**, senior data advisor for NCIPH. Last year, the team led the development of a five-year work plan for the center and is eager to begin putting it into action.

## The center's work will:

- Prioritize planning for emerging and evolving threats such as extreme weather, large chemical spills and radiologic events,
- Improve communications with the public, and
- Support public health workforce resiliency and responder mental health.

"Our mission is two-fold," Wiesman said. "We must support a workforce that is challenged with retirements, burnout and less experienced new workers, and we need to help take the lessons learned from the pandemic response and implement best-evidence interventions to ensure strong public health emergency responses to help protect everyone."

The regional center will build the foundation for a robust and resilient public health infrastructure that protects health in times of emergency, particularly for underserved populations and those most vulnerable to the poorest health effects.

By designing strategies where public health systems can collaborate with historically overlooked or marginalized communities, the team can create stronger regional and national partnerships and plans, as well as a more coordinated and equitable public health response.

*The regional center will build the foundation for a robust and resilient public health infrastructure that protects health in times of emergency, particularly for underserved populations and those most vulnerable to the poorest health effects.*

"The center's work aligns with much of NCIPH's practice-based work to support and enhance public health infrastructure at state and local levels, and we are excited to continue public health preparedness and response work at NCIPH and Gillings," said Wallace.

The new regional PHPR center is the newest part of the Gillings School's efforts to enhance public health preparedness. The School is host to the Atlantic Coast Center for Infectious Disease Dynamics and Analytics, part of a national CDC network that provides data and modeling support to public health responders as they prepare for future

infectious disease outbreaks. The School also offers a Community Preparedness and Disaster Management (CPDM) Certificate Program as part of their curriculum, which provides an "all hazards" approach to disaster management through online courses, as well as the Gillings on the Ground (GoG) program, a two-semester training initiative designed to educate participants on disaster response and emergency management.

All are part of a long-standing commitment to research, teaching and practice that supports preparedness, clean air and clean water, and healthy communities and families. 🏡

Gillings School faculty member Bill Gentry (left) evaluates a community-preparedness operation.



# Gillings School receives \$5M from USDA to address maternal health warning signs among WIC participants

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has awarded a \$5 million grant to the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health and its partners, the University of Illinois-Chicago, National WIC Association, Reaching our Sisters Everywhere (ROSE) and Urban Metrics Consultants. This funding will support research and implementation of evidence-based strategies that can recognize and treat urgent maternal health warning signs among participants in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) supplemental food program.

Led by **Dorothy Cilenti, DrPH**, and **Christine Tucker, PhD**, of the Gillings School's Department of Maternal and Child Health (MCH), researchers from a diverse team of academic and maternal health organizations will review evidence to determine what is effective to identify and address urgent maternal health warning signs among pregnant and postpartum people to reduce maternal morbidity and mortality. Then, through a competitive process, the team will provide funding to state and local WIC sites across the U.S. to test and adapt these evidence-based interventions in a variety of WIC settings.

"WIC serves around 600,000 pregnant and postpartum women a year, and many of them may need additional medical or behavioral health care following pregnancy," Cilenti said. "They have the capacity to build awareness and educate the population, but they also

are a major provider of services to local communities. So, they can be a great referral and connection point for those in need."

"We have an amazing team leading this work," Tucker said, "including new faculty members in MCH **Lindsey Yates, PhD**, and **Larelle Brookhart, PhD**, who bring expertise in implementation science and breastfeeding support, and Deputy Director **Amy Mullenix, MSPH, MSW**."

Pregnancy-related complications result in approximately 700 deaths in the U.S. each year, according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and the rates of short or long-term health impacts related to labor and delivery are even higher. Risks can include cardiac events, high blood pressure, stroke, mental health crises, postpartum depression or anxiety, substance use disorder, intimate partner violence, and more.

Over five years, the research team will work closely with FNS to support adapting and testing evidence-based interventions to recognize the signs of these health risks and improve maternal health. This project is expected to result in findings that can be used to inform future approaches to support maternal health in WIC settings.

"I am excited to rigorously evaluate these interventions and contribute to the evidence base of what works to improve maternal health in WIC settings," said Tucker.

"The Gillings School has been building capacity to support states and communities to address the maternal health crisis through the Maternal Health Learning and Innovation Center, and this work extends our reach to the WIC program," Cilenti added. "It also demonstrates our

commitment to translating what works from research or academia to the field. We are co-designing and co-creating the evidence with the practitioners, which increases the likelihood that the interventions will actually be effective and implemented in community settings." 

The grant runs through March 2029. To learn more, please visit [fns.usda.gov/grant/wic-recognizing-addressing-mmm-warning-signs](https://fns.usda.gov/grant/wic-recognizing-addressing-mmm-warning-signs).

*We are co-designing and co-creating the evidence with the practitioners, which increases the likelihood that the interventions will actually be effective and implemented in community settings.*



# Welcome to our new faculty!

Every year, the Gillings School is proud to welcome new faculty who bring a wealth of expertise in diverse areas of public health. Say hello to some of our most recent hires!



**Iheoma U. Iruka, PhD**

Professor of Maternal and Child Health; Adjunct Professor of Public Policy; Fellow, Frank Porter Graham (FPG) Child Development Institute

Iruka is an applied developmental psychologist who is focused on ensuring that racially minoritized children and children from low-income households thrive through anti-bias, anti-racist and culturally grounded mixed-methods approaches. As the founding director of the Equity Research Action Coalition at FPG, Iruka’s action-oriented research-to-policy and practice focuses on (1) early childhood research and evaluation attending to the healthy, academic and socio-emotional development of racially minoritized children and children from low-income communities, (2) equitable policies that advance health, wealth and early educational equity, (3) mentoring and training of emerging scholars from minoritized communities, and (4) translation of science to counter deficit-oriented research, practice and policy regarding minoritized communities.



**Kamaria Mason, MS, MPH, RDN, LDN**

Assistant Professor of Nutrition

Mason is an educator who contributes to the nationwide discourse on public health nutrition. Her commitment to excellence in education extends beyond the classroom. Her insights gained from roles in academia, clinical nutrition, local government, research and community engagement uniquely position her to shape the next generation of public health nutrition leaders.

As a co-founder of the Culture of Wellness, she works with organizations to empower individuals, communities and food systems to make changes from the inside out to create a food culture where healthy choices are inclusive, balanced and accessible. In her role at UNC Gillings School of Public Health, she works primarily with students enrolled in the bachelor’s and master’s programs seeking to become registered dietitians. She teaches three nutrition counseling, communication and culture courses, and a nutrition practicum course.



**Bryce Rowland, PhD**

Assistant Professor of Biostatistics

Rowland is an assistant professor in the Department of Biostatistics at the Collaborative Studies Coordinating Center (CSCC). His research expertise is at the intersection of precision medicine, applied biostatistics and team science. Currently, Rowland serves as a co-investigator on clinical trials in chronic pain and cardiovascular disease funded by both the National Institutes of Health and Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute. During his National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, Rowland researched extending polygenic risk score methodologies and analyzed biobank-sized ‘omics data.

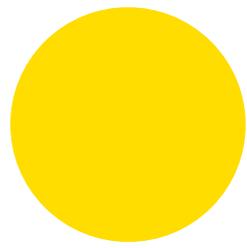
Rowland is committed to training the next generation of collaborative biostatisticians. This is done through a combination of teaching and mentorship through hands-on work at the CSCC.



**Minzhi Xing, MD, MPH**

Assistant Professor of Public Health Leadership and Practice; Adjunct Assistant Professor of Radiology

Xing is a medical epidemiologist and health services researcher with a background in local and global public health practice. She has extensive experience in conducting epidemiological, patient-focused and community-engaged research and in developing public health solutions to advance health equity. The overarching goal of her work is to bridge the gap between the practice of medicine and public health by using data-driven and community-centered shared leadership approaches to create, develop, implement and evaluate interventions. Xing collaborates extensively with community-based partners, local and state health departments, and health systems to increase health care accessibility and improve the quality of care, with the goal of reducing barriers and eliminating disparities in health. 🏠



# Why I chose

# Gillings



## Smritee Thapa

### First-year MPH in Health Equity, Social Justice and Human Rights

I came to the realization that I wanted to pursue public health several months after my undergraduate graduation. I have long been passionate about transforming systems of inequity, drawing from both my personal experiences and hearing others' stories. I also realized that I often gravitated towards equity-related roles in my academic, professional and personal life and knew that I wanted to continue in that direction. Knowing this, some friends suggested that I look into the public health field, and it quickly felt like the right fit for me.

I was specifically drawn to the Master of Public Health (MPH) degree in Health Equity, Social Justice and Human Rights at Gillings due to my prior experiences and my belief that public health and equity are intertwined, and one cannot exist without the other. Gillings was one of the few schools that I considered that offered a concentration of its kind. Other factors that I took into account primarily included location, cost and funding availability. Now that I am at Gillings, I am excited to learn and grow over these next two years. Although the field of equity is full of questions that do not have one correct answer, I hope to achieve a greater understanding of the role that I can play in eliminating inequities through community-led initiatives.

## Laura Hergenrother, MPhil

### Second-year doctoral student

As a young person, I always envisioned a career focused on improving the health of those around me. With time, I came to realize that my ideal path included research, advocacy and mentoring. Through these means, I hope to become a leader in reducing inequities in maternal and child health outcomes, which is why I chose to pursue a doctoral degree in public health.

From the first moment I walked through the doors, I knew Gillings would be a wonderful place to pursue research on health outcomes associated with family-friendly policies like paid family leave. Not only did the research and

practical commitment to health equity draw me in, the feeling of community and inclusion was instant. I was looking for a friendly and rigorous place to train and build confidence in my next steps as a researcher, and Gillings fulfilled those needs.

I considered several other programs, mostly in the United Kingdom, which is where I did my master's. While the emphasis on doctoral training overseas is on research, I realized that I sought additional training in quantitative analysis to round out my qualitative skillset and achieve my career goals in health policy research. Gillings and my wonderful, wonderful mentors offer fantastic training to achieve these aims. The skills and knowledge that I have gained in the past year have empowered me to believe that I am ready to produce a dissertation that I am extremely proud of. Moving forward, I know that Gillings will equip me to start my career leading research projects on socioeconomic policies that promote equitable health benefits for our parents, infants, families and communities.

## Araba Oduro

### Second-year MPH student in Global Health

I became interested in public health because of its holistic approach to addressing health disparities and improving the well-being of communities, particularly underserved populations. My background as a clinician in child health and my experience working on various health projects, like Operation Zero Mortality and MEBCI 2.0, showed me how social determinants and systemic



Laura Hergenrother, MPhil

inequities can deeply affect health outcomes. Public health felt like a path where I could make a broader impact beyond individual patient care, focusing on preventative care and health equity.

Gillings stood out to me because of its emphasis on innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration and commitment to addressing real-world health challenges, especially in global health, which aligns with my concentration. The School's strong reputation — being the number one *public* school of public health in the United States and second best overall — its dedicated faculty and opportunities for hands-on experience made it feel like a place where I could grow and develop new skills for a career in public health.

When considering a school, I look for a curriculum that balances theory and practical application, faculty expertise, the availability of research opportunities, and strong support for student engagement and networking. A commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion are also key factors for me. I considered other schools but ultimately chose Gillings because it offered the best combination of academic excellence, affordability, and a commitment to inclusion and diversity that aligned with my professional and personal values.



Araba Oduro

Through my program at Gillings, I hope to gain the skills and knowledge to lead impactful public health initiatives, particularly those that address health disparities and improve maternal and child health outcomes in low-resource settings. I also aim to build a strong network of public health professionals and engage in meaningful research that contributes to policy and practice.

## Ariel Snyder

### Second-year MPH student in Maternal, Child and Family Health Concentration

In 2020, I was diagnosed with Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). Prior to my diagnosis, I had been seriously ill for several years with symptoms that my doctors struggled to classify. Receiving my long-awaited PCOS diagnosis was bittersweet, as it offered only short-term relief. Like so many people with PCOS, of which there are nearly five million in the U.S., I was immediately informed by my health care provider that viable treatments were essentially nonexistent. In the ensuing three years, I would be diagnosed with a range of comorbid chronic health conditions associated with PCOS, mostly metabolic health issues — all of which lack integrated treatment protocols. Influenced by my personal journey and frustration with the lack of reproductive

*“Gillings stood out to me because of its emphasis on innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration and commitment to addressing real-world health challenges.”*

Araba Oduro

disorder research and interventions, I made the decision to pivot into public health and enroll in the MPH program in the Maternal, Child and Family Health concentration at the Gillings School.

As a first-generation student from a lower-resourced family and an older returning student with chronic health issues, I wanted to find a school that would value my lived experience as much as my professional and academic experiences. Additionally, since reproductive disorders remain an overlooked issue across all public health institutions, I knew the Gillings School’s maternal and child health (MCH) department would provide me the best possible access to explore the intersection of reproductive health research, implementation science, reproductive health policy and reproductive justice. I also found that I matched the energy of previous MPH students, and I wasn’t wrong — my fellow second-year MCH students are among the smartest and loveliest people.

Culture was of paramount importance when evaluating MPH programs, along with mentorship opportunities. Ultimately, I sought an inclusive, supportive, friendly and rigorous learning environment. Location was another factor. The access to nature that Chapel Hill/Carrboro affords was a big selling point! I also considered other great programs, but they didn’t meet the culture fit or offer the research opportunities I found at the Gillings School.



Ariel Snyder

Ultimately, I hope to transform my lived experience with PCOS into positive, systemic solutions that will decrease time to diagnosis, produce more accurate measures of prevalence, increase federal funding for reproductive disorder research and reduce PCOS patient suffering. In terms of immediate next steps, I plan to continue my education in hopes of becoming an implementation scientist and eventually translate reproductive disorder research into improved policies, medical guidelines and treatments.

## Mary Feser

### Second-year MPH in Applied Epidemiology

While I’ve always been interested in health, my interest in public health solidified while working in HIV cost-effectiveness research after college (coinciding with the start of COVID-19). These experiences sparked an interest in infectious disease epidemiology and control, which I’ve further explored during my MPH program. More broadly, because health is foundational — our health and the health of others around us impacts all facets of life — and because all our societal choices impact health, I think public health is a particularly rich and fascinating field.

What set Gillings apart from other top public health schools was the quality of the epidemiology



Mary Feser

methods education, the culture and the affordable cost. The epidemiology department is one of the best in the country, but it retains a collaborative and welcoming culture. From when I was first accepted to the program, I was struck by how often faculty or staff reached out, offering to answer questions or connect me with others who shared my interests. Gillings also offers this world-class education at a fraction of the cost of many of the other schools I considered, which I think reflects a commitment to making an education in public health accessible to all those who want to pursue it.

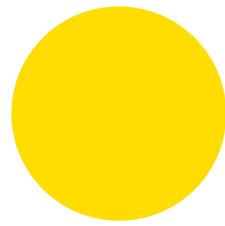
During my time at Gillings, I hope to develop a strong foundation in epidemiological methods and to learn to translate findings from research to practice. I hope to use these skills to pursue a doctoral program in epidemiology and eventually to serve communities effectively and responsibly in a governmental public health role. 📖

*Are you ready to choose Gillings?*

To apply, get started here:

[sph.unc.edu/students/how-to-apply](https://sph.unc.edu/students/how-to-apply)





# Jonathan Earnest works to boost college access and student success

## What's your role in public health?

I'm the director of admissions within Student Affairs at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health.

Access to higher education is a public health issue — it's a social determinant of health — and I like being part of systemic change on that front. I'm also proud to work with and support students, faculty and staff who are change agents in local and global communities.

I often get asked by prospective students, "What makes Gillings unique?" Community is at the heart of everything we do at the Gillings School. That's what keeps me here and that's what sets us apart.

## Can you describe your focus area in one sentence?

**I lead a team that creates, implements and promotes best practices that boost college access and increase student success.**

This is important work for us to be engaged in within our own community and also globally. It's about the democratization of education.

No matter what our role, we should be intentional about equitable practices, accessibility and fostering a sense of belonging. I appreciate that, at Gillings, this is not a one-off conversation but rather something we strive to embed in all we do. To me, that's critical to being "passionately public" both in public education and in public health.

## What brought you to public health?

I would have studied it if I'd known what it was earlier in my life. As an early admissions recruiter, I met an academic adviser who shared an analogy with me: Picture a river that people are falling into. Doctors and nurses and other professionals we all grew up learning about are pulling the victims out, assessing them and treating their injuries one by one. The public health professional goes to the source to find out why people are falling into the river in the first place and addresses that problem so it doesn't happen again.

Public health is prevention. It's about systems and communities. It redefines the unacceptable.

Most of my career has been related to public health, though maybe indirectly. I earned a master's degree in rehabilitation and mental health counseling and I am also a certified health coach and personal trainer. I applied to a student success role with the Gillings School's Department of Nutrition about seven years ago because I wanted to continue working with students, increase access to higher education and contribute to a field that aligns with my values. I became the School's director of admissions about two years ago. I've worked with recruitment and admissions as well as college access programs for about 16 years now. It seems my real job is to stay in college forever!



Earnest relaxes outdoors with his pup, Tommy Pickles.

## How have you pivoted during your public health career?

When I was with the nutrition department, I loved my role because I was engaged with students throughout their time at the School. I'm still connected with many people I advised in that position, but my new role allows me to forge relationships with faculty, staff and students across Gillings departments. It also allows me to have more influence on policies and best practices.

The internal and external pressures on higher education have changed so much in the past year. It feels like every day is a pivot, or perhaps an invitation to be innovative. It's important for us all to love what we do. There are too many people counting on us for us not to be fully invested in our work. I'm grateful to work with a team of people who truly love what they do and who are genuinely passionate about helping students pursue their interest in public health.

## Who are you when you're at home?

I'm a student — of life and in a doctoral program! I'm starting the dissertation phase of a doctorate in higher ed leadership. Studying higher education and discussing challenges in the field with my brilliant cohort have really helped me to remember my "why."

I am a certified personal trainer, spend as much time as I can outdoors and have a "senior pup" (he's 13!) named Tommy Pickles. I love to travel, binge watch terrible reality TV and go to local trivia nights. I really enjoy living in Durham, especially for the food scene.

I'm also a painter. I've always been into art and, as a kid, wanted to be an animator for Disney. Instead, I got a business degree! I returned to painting during the pandemic, largely as a response to political and social events. People commissioned pieces from me and I was proud to raise funds to support voting rights, Black Lives Matter and The Trevor Project. 🎨

More Pivot interviews: [sph.unc.edu/comm/the-pivot](https://sph.unc.edu/comm/the-pivot)

# Bridging the gap through communication

At the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, we recognize the vital role of effective public health communication in saving lives. Strong support from our leadership, faculty and staff ensures our communications and marketing unit can adapt to the evolving media landscape.

To that end, we are wrapping up a strategic communications and marketing review that will help our unit strengthen its processes and bring dynamic communication to the broad audiences we serve.

We have grown our team to include a role that is focused on admissions communications, enabling us to stay in closer touch with prospective students as they navigate the admissions process.

News travels fast, and mis- and disinformation travel even faster. We continue to resist the urge to throw up our hands in response to what can seem like an insurmountable wave of bad information and, instead, continue to connect the dots that lead to beneficial public health impact and outcomes.

Our faculty's expanding presence in mainstream media outlets, in addition to scientific journals, increases the reach of public health messaging to broader audiences who benefit from reliable information.

Finally, thanks to the generous support of the Burroughs Wellcome Fund, our Public Health Communications Fellowship continues to instill talented Master of Public Health students with the communications skills necessary to address ongoing public health challenges. 📖

Left to right: First-year communications fellows Khalanie Taylor and Alana Austin, Associate Dean for Communications and Marketing Matthew Chamberlin, and second-year communications fellows Ethan Chupp and Shriti Pant.



## Media Mentions

Gillings experts have been quoted or mentioned across a range of media outlets.



### Top articles



**The artificial sweetener aspartame now considered a 'possible carcinogen'**

NBC News | July 13, 2023



**Tracking a mom's first year after birth revealed shocking insights**

HuffPost | August 8, 2023



**Amid signs of a Covid uptick, researchers brace for the 'new normal'**

The New York Times | August 2, 2023



**The US food industry has long buried the truth about their products**

The Guardian | May 20, 2024

### Top Gillings news



**UNC Gillings School to host new CDC center for outbreak forecasting, response**

September 19, 2023



**Paxlovid, molnupiravir substantially reduced Omicron hospitalization, death**

September 21, 2023



**Menthol cigarette bans could lead nearly a quarter of smokers to quit**

February 21, 2024



**UNC Gillings ranked No. 1 public school of public health in US**

April 9, 2024

# Mary Margaret Carroll leads advancement at Gillings School



The Gillings School is pleased to welcome Mary Margaret Carroll as associate dean for advancement.

In this role, she leads the School's fundraising efforts and manages the advancement team in its development, external affairs and alumni relations activities. She also serves as executive director of the UNC Public Health Foundation and in a senior management capacity on the Dean's Council in addition to managing the School's Advisory Council and Alumni Association Advisory Board. Carroll is, by her own account, a mission-driven leader who holds a deep appreciation for Carolina that was shaped by Dean Smith's Carolina Way. Additionally, she brings to the Gillings School personal experience developing, soliciting and stewarding donors across five continents.

"I'm a different person than when I came to Carolina, and it's because of the experiences I've had, the people I've met, the missions I've served and the places I've been," she said. "I resonate deeply with the mission statement of the Gillings School. We have a responsibility to contribute to public health around the world, to challenge the inequities we see and to better them."

Carroll adopts an approach to philanthropy that centers on trust, which she builds with donors and friends through transparent, consistent and relevant communication about philanthropy's role in a project paired with timely updates about progress and outcomes.

One experience that drove home the need to pair passion with authentic communication came during a trip to Uganda with **Ross M. Boyce, MD**, assistant professor of epidemiology at the Gillings School, who

studies the epidemiology of vector-borne diseases in rural communities, both in North Carolina and East Africa. The experience of working directly with local community members left her feeling better able to connect with passionate individuals, researchers and funders to make a case for the project.

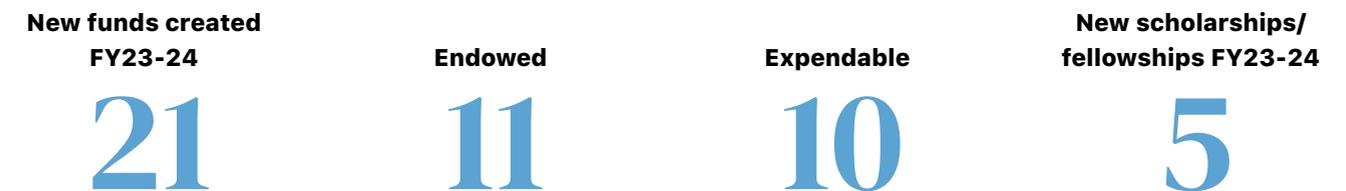
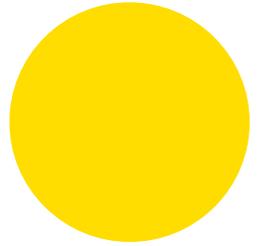
"I feel genuinely rewarded when the right donor is matched with the right program, research opportunity or greatest need that can be met through philanthropy," said Carroll.

Before coming to Gillings, Carroll most recently served as interim associate dean for advancement at UNC Kenan Flagler Business School. There she worked with a team of fundraising professionals to "dig deeper," developing an approach that focused on key areas of impact to fund research, faculty support, scholarships and capital improvements.

She joined the Kenan-Flagler Business School team in 2021, initially serving as executive director of development before becoming assistant dean for advancement. Prior to that, she was senior executive director of development at UNC Health, where she oversaw a team dedicated to securing philanthropic support for medical research, patients in need and global health-related initiatives.

"We are fortunate to welcome Mary Margaret Carroll to the role of associate dean for advancement," said **Nancy Messonnier, MD**, dean and Bryson Distinguished Professor in Public Health at the Gillings School. "She is a seasoned development professional with a track record of success in both fundraising and leading teams. I look forward to working with her to connect potential donors with members of the School's staff, faculty and student body around shared passions to achieve outstanding results." 

# Your support helps advance public health education!



as of 10/14/24, grants through 8/31/2024

# Volunteer board chairs

## Public health relies on broad expertise



**Katie Kaney,**  
DrPH, MBA, FACHE

Founder, Whole Person Index; Author:  
*Both/And: Medicine and Public Health Together*; Public Health Foundation Chair

**Kaney**, a former C-suite health care leader, has more than 25 years of experience enhancing care and promoting health. Founder of the Whole Person Index, she is chief executive officer of LovEvolve and an advisor to several health companies. Kaney holds a Doctor of Public Health degree from the Gillings School. *"As members of the Foundation Board, we are sponsors of this great school – advocating for its mission through education, connection and fundraising – to ensure it continues to be the best and lead globally, resulting in better health for all."*



**LeVelton R. Thomas,**  
MHA

Clinical AI Strategy Executive,  
Microsoft; Alumni Association  
Advisory Board Chair

**Thomas** is an accomplished health care and technology executive who holds a bachelor's and Master of Healthcare Administration degree in health policy and management from the Gillings School. He has extensive experience in public health, health care administration, technology and advisory roles. *"Serving as chair of the UNC Gillings Alumni Association Advisory Board is a profound honor. It allows me to give back to the community that shaped my career, foster connections among alumni and support the next generation of public health leaders. Together, we can drive impactful change in public health."*



**Donald A. Holzworth,**  
MS

Entrepreneur in Residence;  
Advisory Council Chair

**Holzworth** is a serial entrepreneur who has founded and led multiple successful health and biotech companies. He chairs Couplet Care and serves on various boards, including the Southern Environmental Law Center, and holds degrees in systems analysis and environmental science, with advanced biostatistics training. *"My role on the Advisory Council is to help recruit members, prepare faculty members or students who have been chosen to speak at meetings and to guide stimulating conversations so that members learn about the School's impactful work and the dean can gain valuable feedback/advice on areas of critical importance."*



### UNC Gillings School graduate honored with 2024 Distinguished Alumnus Award

**Gary White, MS '94** (Environmental Sciences and Engineering) has devoted his life to creating sustainable solutions to provide access to safe drinking water and sanitation to millions of people throughout the world. He is a humanitarian, social entrepreneur and innovator who leads Water.org and WaterEquity, two nonprofits he co-founded with actor Matt Damon to end the global water crisis. **During the University Day celebration on Oct. 11, White received one of four Distinguished Alumni Awards.**



# Support our future leaders

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Gillings School Alumni Association, we invite you to honor this milestone by making a **\$50 contribution** — one dollar for every year of **connections, community and public health impact.**

Your donation will help provide scholarships for future public health leaders, fund cutting-edge research and support our work to address the most pressing health challenges today and tomorrow.

**Together, we can ensure the next 50 years bring even greater health equity, innovation and impact!**



## \$50 for 50 years

Donate \$50 today and be part of our enduring public health legacy at [go.unc.edu/50for50](https://go.unc.edu/50for50)



*The best way to provide  
overarching support for the  
Gillings School is to make a gift to  
the Dean's Acceleration Fund.*

Make a gift today to support continued excellence  
in public health education, research and practice at  
the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health.

[go.unc.edu/Acceleration](https://go.unc.edu/Acceleration)



GILLINGS SCHOOL OF  
GLOBAL PUBLIC HEALTH

## **Read the latest Carolina Public Health: *Public Health and Public Policy***

This issue explores how public health and  
policy work to achieve healthier communities,  
with emphasis on evidence-informed  
strategies and community engagement.

[go.unc.edu/cph-2024](https://go.unc.edu/cph-2024)

