

## **WIDENING THEIR HORIZONS: USING A COURSE ON LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE TO INTRODUCE STUDENTS TO THE PRACTICAL REALITIES AND COMPLEXITY OF COMMUNITY PUBLIC HEALTH**

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### **Type of Activity**

Although multiple studies have documented that a majority of the current public health workforce lack formal education and training in public health, less appreciated is that few schools of public health currently provide structured courses to teach their students about the actual practice of public health at the local level. With grant support from the Association of Schools of Public Health to operate an Academic Health Center, staff from the DeKalb County (Georgia) Board of Health and Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University created and taught the course, Introduction to Public Health Practice, during the 2005 Spring semester.

### **Description of Project**

We designed this two-credit, graduate-level course to provide an overview of public health practice, with emphasis on public health at the local level. Course objectives were to a) explain the influence of politics, economics, and other social determinants on population-based health problems; b) describe the U.S. public health system and the relationships among key stakeholders; and c) describe the role of law and government in promoting and protecting the health of the public. During the first five weekly lessons, a public health official provided an overview of the public health system from the local perspective, with use of multiple interactive case studies. In the subsequent seven lessons, eleven local practitioners discussed their practice areas, which ranged from environmental to refugee to mental health. Assignments included writing a briefing paper for a County Commissioner and, as a team, developing a public health advocacy effort around a community issue using local data and outlining specific strategies and actions.

Because the course content transcends the disciplines (e.g., Statistics, Behavioral Health, Epidemiology, etc.) that define departments at Rollins, we chose to list the course in the Epidemiology Department and cross listed it in other departments. The school's curriculum committee approved the course in June 2004 and, in January 2005, 13 students enrolled in the first class.

### **Successes, Difficulties, and “the Unexpected”**

We used the school's online “blackboard” to post assignments, communicate with students, and obtain their feedback. Feedback has been uniformly positive, with an appreciation for the practical emphasis and use of actual events in case studies. The guest lecturers frequently convey their commitment and passion for their topics, resulting in a spirited dialogue with probing questions from the students. Challenges have included the need to substitute guest lectures when pressing commitments prevent the original speaker from attending class. Another challenge has been finding publications that describe the daily practices of the local public health workforce. Noting the students' unexpected enthusiasm for case studies, we encouraged the guest lecturers to

incorporate these into their lessons and will make this teaching methodology a centerpiece of future offerings of the course.

### **Benefits to Agency and Community**

The Board of Health benefited by forging a stronger alliance with the school of public health, a partnership that has resulted in collaborative efforts in other areas. The instructors from the Board were granted (or will soon be eligible for) adjunct faculty status, an academic distinction that should improve their chances for obtaining grant funding to support future community-based surveys and interventions. The Board instructors also used the course to identify several quality interns for their summer programs, which will benefit the community. The Rollins School of Public Health benefits from having a popular, multidisciplinary course that fulfills a unique niche in the training needs of its students. Recruiting the future public health workforce requires widening the horizons of today's public health graduate students.