

LINKING STUDENTS WITH PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE IN TENNESSEE

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Students in the Principles of Epidemiology class (PH 540) at the University of Tennessee during spring semester 2005 have worked on a set of model evaluation analyses, for a community-based intervention being conducted by the Tennessee Department of Health. This linkage was proposed by a UT graduate student who completed her summer 'field internship' with the Division of Disparity Elimination. The statewide initiative, 'Better Health: It's About Time' is directed to obesity reduction and heart health for minority and other underserved persons in Tennessee. Extensive pre-during-and-post survey data are collected for assessment of the programs impact with individual attitude and behavior change. The "Search Your Heart" curriculum by the American Heart Association is a faith-based initiative that utilizes community facilitators for local education and training. The modules for heart health, diabetes, hypertension, cholesterol, and personal motivation are elements of the data base to be assembled. Clinical examinations (e.g., cholesterol, blood sugar, BMI, blood pressure) are measured at baseline and concomitantly with the data collection cycles. This enormous field operation is being accomplished through the local health department staff. The plan for data analysis is still in development due to vacancies in statistical and epidemiological positions at the state level. The aim of the student learning opportunity was to provide epidemiologic and statistical assistance with database analysis planning and product development, using the skills and energy MPH students.

For the spring exercise, planning of primary data linkages is being performed by the class (e.g., variable selection, connections of specific topical themes across different survey instruments, formatting for products). This approach serves to indoctrinate students regarding the design and planning of a field intervention for public health. Tennessee DoH staff visited the class early in the semester to orient them to state public health goals, to careers in public health and to describe the model field project. The analysis experience has provided students with practical data-based challenges from 'real' survey experiences, e.g., missing data, refused, etc. Classroom lectures have incorporate analytic strategies for sub-group comparisons, and logical continuums for examination. The class will make model data products examining selected variables' relationship with changes in attitudes and behavior, as well as practical changes such as cholesterol lowering or weight loss. Because program implementation is still in progress, these model analyses will be presented in the format of posters, with state and local health department staff 'visiting and viewing' the displays. Simulating a professional meeting provides a practical learning opportunity for students to experience specialized product preparation and presentation.

The project involvement will be continued. During summer 2005, students in the Biostatistics class (PH 530) will work with project data to examine variation between variables for selection of best predictive model options. Then, the fall 2005 Epidemiology class will analyze the data from

the Search Your Heart curriculum for demonstration of practical findings of program impact. Through these simulated data experiences, the Tennessee DoH will receive models of educational products, structures of analysis plans and variable linkages, useful for their eventual reporting of program impact. In addition, summer internships have been announced for students to work with the Tennessee DoH [in Nashville].