Innovations in Public Health Education: Promoting Professional Development and a Culture of Health

As the field of public health advances toward addressing complex, systemic problems, future public health professionals must be equipped with leadership and interprofessional skills that support collaboration and a culture of health.

The University of Memphis School of Public Health has infused innovative strategies into graduate education via experiential learning opportunities to enhance leadership, collaboration, and professional development.

Novel training programs such as Day One, Public Health Interdisciplinary Case Competition, and Memphis Healthy U support Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health cross-cutting competencies and prepare Master of Public Health and Master of Health Administration graduates to function effectively at the outset of their careers and become catalysts for creating a culture of health. (Am J Public Health. 2015;105:S44–S45. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2014.302351)

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School of Public Health has initiated innovative programs to support student professional development and create a culture of health across the university. We describe three programs that highlight our goal of transformative and collaborative learning with a focus on local health priorities.

DAY ONE

The first innovation—Day One—is a yearlong series of mandatory workshops designed to develop Master of Public Health (MPH) and Master of Health Administration (MHA) students’ skills in leadership, professionalism, team building, and career readiness. Day One workshops use feedback from public health and health care preceptors, along with Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health competencies, to prepare students for job entry immediately after graduation.

Workshops are held monthly, and topics include written and oral communication, presenting formally, resume and cover letter preparation, networking, business etiquette, leadership, team building, practicum orientation, and advocacy. MHA students earn two credit hours for the Day One series, whereas MPH students engage in the workshops as part of a Foundations of Public Health core course. Most skills covered in Day One are linked to the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health cross-cutting competencies, with major foci being leadership, professionalism, and communication. Student feedback, obtained in alumni surveys, has been very positive, citing this as one of the most valuable experiences in their graduate training.

PUBLIC HEALTH INTERDISCIPLINARY CASE COMPETITION

A second innovation is our Public Health Interdisciplinary Case Competition. Interdisciplinary teams of graduate and professional students from both health-related and non–health-related disciplines (public health, law, anthropology, nursing, health promotion, health and sport sciences, communication) work together and use their collective knowledge to address important public health concerns in the Memphis, Tennessee, community. Public health master’s and doctoral students are recruited by their program directors; approximately 10% of School of Public Health students participate. Students of other disciplines are referred by associate deans of their schools. The case consultation format has existed for more than 25 years, but the inclusion of nontraditional disciplines (e.g., social work, communication, anthropology, law) reflecting a social determinants approach is novel and certainly innovative in the local community.

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MEMPHIS HEALTHY U

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on the University of Memphis campus. Memphis Healthy U, a campuswide initiative to promote healthy living through a healthy university environment for its current and future students, employees, and visitors, was launched in 2013 at the request of the university president.

Memphis Healthy U encourages the campus community to “move more, eat healthier, and be tobacco free” (http://www.memphis.edu/memphishealthyu). The following organizations, departments, and vendors collaborate in providing support to create a norm for healthy lifestyles: President's Office, Provost's Office, Student Affairs, Human Resources, Business and Finance, School of Public Health, Loewenberg School of Nursing, Department of Health and Sport Sciences, Student Government Association, Student Health Services, Residence Life and Dining Services, Student Recreation and Fitness Center, Counseling Center, Alumni Affairs, Aramark/Tiger Dining, Athletics, and Communications, Public Relations, and Marketing.

Public health students gain valuable experience in cross-disciplinary teams to plan, organize, and implement Memphis Healthy U activities. Two MPH graduate assistants coordinate day-to-day operations, and shared responsibility exists for activity leadership across 17 colleges, departments, and the community to promote an organizational culture of health. A major component used to increase physical activity is Midday Moves, in which various campus groups lead fun daily physical activities on the Alumni Mall for 20 minutes. Midday Moves implemented a variety of activities (e.g., yoga, football toss, tai chi, Zumba) during the first semester; the School of Public Health hosted yoga (led by an MPH student) during its rotation, with classmates and faculty in attendance. Over a nine-week period, 1,491 participants attended a Midday Moves event, averaging 33 participants per session. During a recent Midday Moves activity, the University of Memphis unofficially set a Guinness World Record for the most people (402) doing sit-ups for one minute.

The campus features a tobacco-free policy in designated areas. A new Tiger Bike Share Program provides bicycles for students, faculty, and staff to rent each semester. Other Memphis Healthy U activities include a Web site showcasing an online support team, campus-wide walkathons, group bike rides to football games, desk-to-5k training and races, and free weekly nutrition classes. A sustainability fair features healthy food and a group bicycle ride to campus. Specific campaign posters, e-mail templates, banners, and promotional videos in dorms increase campus awareness for healthy lifestyle choices, and targeted marketing efforts encourage active use of stairs and walking trails.

The comprehensive approach to health extends to campus food service. Aramark/Tiger Dining venues have introduced healthy options, iPads display nutritional information, and a downloadable application provides nutrient analyses. Aramark’s catering menu showcases healthy box lunches. Since inception of Memphis Healthy U in 2010, Aramark sales of bottled soda declined 32%, and bottled water sales increased 29%. Candy bar sales declined 30% since 2011. Memphis Healthy U principles of “move more, eat healthier, and be tobacco free” are ingrained into the School of Public Health culture. All foods at School of Public Health social events and meetings are healthy, “Tigers Take the Stairs” signage is prominent on all floors of the building, and a tobacco-free environment is the norm.

SUMMARY

The three innovations at the University of Memphis were developed to enhance the student experience and prepare these public health professionals for success in the community. The programs provided experiential learning suggested by community preceptors and advisers that would augment traditional coursework. The innovations also support several Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health cross-cutting competencies. They engage public health students in professional skill development (Day One), interprofessional collaboration and systems thinking (Interdisciplinary Case Competition), and leadership in providing environmental support for health (Memphis Healthy U). Outcomes have yet to be measured in this cohort of students, but early feedback from evaluation data and alumni surveys indicated that these were valued experiences. In supporting professional development and finding solutions via collaboration, we educate and train students with more experiential learning to become catalysts for creating a culture of health.

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Contributors

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