School of Community Health Sciences: A long-standing tradition of service to community

No matter the name of the degree or decade in which it was conferred, alumni of the current School of Community Health Sciences have a long tradition of service to the community.

From relatively humble beginnings in the 1970s to an institution of nearly 800 undergraduate students and 60 graduate students today, the School of Community Health Sciences continues to produce skill-based students who “speak” health and understand how to look at population health statistics and then use those statistics to provide a picture of the community’s health.

“Graduates know the vocabulary of payers, insurance companies, health disparities and ethics so they can go into any environment dealing with health and give that company or agency a better understanding of the processes in the workplace. They have the ‘whole health’ picture, including the socio-economic, educational and cultural impacts on health,” says Trudy Larson, M.D., director of the School of Community Health Sciences.

“We have alumni working in health care delivery, evaluation and administration and as doctors, hospital administrators, physical therapists and personal trainers,” she says. “Our graduates are trained in the five core areas of public health; biostatistics, environmental health, epidemiology, health administration and policy and social and behavioral health, all of which will be immediately needed in the next 10 years because more than 50 percent of the current public health work force is retiring.”

Through their studies in the classroom and in the community, both undergraduate and graduate students are able to put personal health issues in the broader context of public, or community health. They know how to interpret data and reach a conclusion that the data supports as well as the practical application of that knowledge.

A requirement of all School of Community Health Sciences students, whether undergraduates or graduates, is an internship in a public health setting. For undergraduates, it is a 100-hour requirement with a project that benefits the agency where the internship is held. For the master’s degree in public health, the requirement is a 270-hour internship in a community agency with a culminating project that takes the place of a written thesis. According to Larson, many of the agencies that have had Community Health Science interns at the graduate level hire them following graduation.

Community agencies that need public health projects work through Gerold Dermid ’10MBA, the School of Community Health Sciences’ coordinator of community relations and field studies, to recruit students eager to put their skills and enthusiasm to use.

“Public agencies come to me with a need at the local, national or even international level and I match them with our students. At any point in the academic year, we have 150 to 200 undergraduates doing their internships, or field studies,” Dermid says. “Our graduate students do their internships in the areas of epidemiology, social and behavioral health or health administration and policy and we usually have about two dozen of them in the field.”

The Nevada Cancer Coalition is one such agency that has benefitted from the work of Community Health Science students bringing their skill set to bear on specific projects.

Executive Director Cari Herington says having students work there is a huge benefit for an
understaffed agency such as hers.

“One of our undergraduate students worked on our tobacco-free teen program by setting up a teen-friendly web page and coordinating with the schools to set up presentations,” Herington says. “She offered a fresh, peer perspective to help teens and young people stop smoking.”

Another undergraduate intern worked on a skin cancer campaign by pulling together web resources and building an online promotion campaign.

“Charlotte Andreason, our graduate student this summer, worked with our breast cancer screening program and did research and focus groups to help us determine that the lack of screenings was an accessibility issue,” Herington says.

Andreason then created an online interactive resource map annotating locations across the state where women can receive mammograms.

Herington says working with University of Nevada, Reno students is a “win-win” situation for both parties: students work in their profession and get connected with leaders in their field, while the Nevada Cancer Coalition provides more access to health care resources for its population.

Jeff Dold, director of the More to Life Adult Health Day Care Center in Sparks, says students “bring a sense of wonder” and enthusiasm to his program.

“Students are group leaders for our client events and bring new programs and ideas that we wouldn’t otherwise have,” he says, citing an example of the laughter yoga class that quickly caught on with his clients.

Dold says he tries to match the needs of his clients with the strength of the students so that at the end of the internship, people that came together as strangers leave as friends.

“These students bring life and youthfulness to our seniors. They add new excitement to old events and are innovative, creative and have a new way of thinking,” he says.

At the Washoe County School District, Community Health Science students work with the employee and retiree wellness program, according to Laura Edman, program coordinator.

“They established a stress management program with online and in-person components. They are able to find local wellness resources and make connections with them. And these students help our employees get out from behind the desk and move,” she says.

With more than 100 locations across the county, University students help the school district broaden the reach of its wellness programs to employees across the area with variety and re-engagement.

Edman says she tries to match students’ passions with the needs of district employees because that passion is contagious and passes on to those participating in wellness programs.

Faculty is likewise engaged in the community looking at real-world problems and applying their expertise to develop information to inform policy and community planning.

“The state of Nevada calls on our faculty for program planning and evaluation, for community health needs assessments, and for consultation with health data needs,” Larson says. “We want to be known as a community resource for expertise in public health and want to share that expertise to improve the health of our population”.

For more information, please contact Gerold Dermid, coordinator of field studies and community relations at gdermid@unr.edu or visit http://chs.unr.edu

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Health Sciences alumna give back

Marena Works ’95MSN, ’07MPH, uses her degree from the School of Community Health Sciences to give back to her community of Carson City.

Works pursued her joint master’s degree in nursing and public health, not knowing what doors it would open for her in the future. Since graduation, she has put her interdisciplinary knowledge to use when she accepted the job of health director in Carson City for the newly expanded health department. She has spearheaded and overseen the accreditation process for Carson City Health and Human Services, which is no small undertaking.

Recently, she took on a new challenge as the deputy manager of Carson City. When she isn’t busy using her education to serve the citizens of Carson City, she gives back to the school by co-chairing the School of Community Health Sciences Advisory Board, which is tasked with providing support and advice to the leadership of the school as they work towards their goal of becoming an accredited School of Public Health.

In reminiscing about her experience as a student in the School of Community Health Sciences, she said: “I believe individuals succeed in higher education by allowing their minds to be transformed and their way of thinking expanded. As a master’s student in a dual program, I received the individual nurturing I needed for my transformation to take place from the faculty at the School of Community Health Sciences.”

To read more about alumni from the School of Community Health Sciences please visit http://chs.unr.edu/subpages/community/alumni.html.