

ON THE EVERYDAY NOBILITY OF SPH ALUMNI

Who Are We? Where Are We? What Are We Doing?

Dear Friends:

Just what we do all day, and why, is sometimes difficult for us to get across to people outside our field. Many

among us try to explain our work and our passion for it to family and friends, not quite sure that they 'get it'. Some of you may recall Bob Newhart's early comedy routines. He'd conduct a one-sided telephone conversation, during which he'd recap his unseen interlocutor's statements in such a way that the audience understood the absurdity of the situation. Such a conversation with an SPH MPH alumnus might go like this:

"So, you got this degree in a field that is so broad that people come to it with backgrounds as diverse as statistics and social work, nursing and nutrition, medicine and the military, epidemiology and education, community organization and corporate management – all earning the same basic degree?"

Yes.

"And you come out of this School with not just one focal skill set, but with dozens of cross-cutting competencies, so that the scientist can function as a policy analyst, the infectious disease epidemiologist as a behavioral health researcher, the practitioner as a planner, the industrial hygienist as a community organizer, the laboratorian as an advocate, the environmental protector as a media expert, and the program administrator as a systems thinker?"

Right.

"And everyone has to be proficient in communication, new technology, finance, culture, professional ethics, administrative law, and leadership?"

Sure.

"Not to mention being on top of informatics; applied genomics; health literacy; emergency preparation for

chemical, biological, natural, and nuclear disaster; changing occupational and environmental regulation; the social determinants of chronic disease; and the elimination of interpersonal violence, all the while alert to emerging zoonotic infections and degradation of the global village?"

Of course.

"And you aim to have a prevention orientation prevail within systems skewed toward treatment, and to have the population seen as the appropriate unit of analysis and action?"

Yep.

"And your central task as public health alumni is to secure public support, as expressed in budgets and policies, for programs and services that, if successful, most folks won't even know about?"

You got it.

"Yeah, I especially love the one you tell about how when surveillance enables you to control an epidemic, your funding gets cut 'since there's nothing going on', thereby assuring that the general public does, in fact, come to learn about the resurgence of preventable diseases. That's rich....All this, and yet you CHOOSE to work in public health?"

We do.

This issue of *Healthviews* is devoted to the work and accomplishments of alumni of the School of Public Health. By showcasing several individual alumni and their achievements, we illuminate the impact of dedicated public health practitioners upon challenges to the public's health in local, state and national arenas.

Each of the School of Public Health's more than 3,500 cumulative graduates and certificate holders could not be featured, of course. Nonetheless, we wish to show the range

and reach of the majority of alumni, 85 percent of whom are Masters-prepared. So, here we consider alumni whose mastery of the scope of public health knowledge and methods is evident every day. Our academic profile is varied:

Approximately 500 of us earned Doctorates, and over 3,000 of us earned Master's degrees. Nearly 30 percent of UIC SPH graduates have more than one University of Illinois degree, and approximately 100 alumni have earned more than one degree from the SPH.

Some of us comprise the initial wave of this century's innovators: there will be dozens of alumni with Masters in Clinical Research, in Healthcare Administration and in Public Health Informatics by the end of 2008. Cumulatively, approximately 250 UIC SPH alumni have been elected to Delta Omega, the honorary society in public health.

We live and work everywhere:

Not surprisingly, we are located throughout Illinois, with approximately one third of us presently living in Cook County. Our impact is not only local, however; California and Florida together claim more than 200 alumni. Nearly 300 of us live in other Midwestern states, more than 100 of us live on the East coast, and another approximately 100 alumni live in the Washington, D.C. metro area. Alaska is the only state where our alumni do not yet reside. Nearly 50 of us presently live outside the U.S., in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe.

Our faces and experiences are increasingly diverse:

While the 2:1 ratio of female to male alumni has remained fairly constant, nearly half of recent graduates have been alumni of color. We come from dozens of nations and have urban, rural and national experience. We range in age from our 20's to our 80's, all contributing to the collective enterprise of public health.

We advance the profession and support the School:

Alumni provide practicum placements and internships for students, and serve on numerous committees, councils and associations. We network to support students, other alumni, the School of Public Health and the University generally.

We work on behalf of the public in many settings:

In the public sector, we staff and lead local and state health departments, manage programs in Veteran's and other public hospitals, and lead health initiatives within non-health public

systems, including boards of education and other units of local, state and federal government. At any given time, a handful of us work for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

We teach in public and private universities, within and outside Illinois. Many of us practice our licensed professions such as nursing, social work, psychology and medicine in public and private medical settings, bringing public health's tools and perspectives to clinical problems and to the administration of health care. We educate and organize within community-based not-for-profit organizations. We run foundations, lead voluntary health organizations and staff professional associations. We work for pharmaceutical companies, academic and community hospitals, regulatory and accrediting agencies, and throughout private industry. Some of us are even...consultants.

In sum, alumni define and hold the line:

As our professors have taught us, a core feature of our profession is to continuously redefine the unacceptable. UIC SPH alumni serve daily in professional and volunteer capacities to locate, describe, measure and fortify the lines of defense against wide-ranging assaults on the public's health. UIC SPH alumni can be found making common cause with diverse persons, communities, interests and institutions to protect societal assets and solve societal problems.

And it's our privilege to do so.

Sherry E. Weingart, MPH, 1980

President-Elect, University of Illinois School of Public Health Alumni Association

Iko Safika, MPH student in Health Policy Administration, discusses her poster with Alumni Association Board Member Diane Howard, PhD '05, at the 2008 Research Day

