



Undergraduates Are the New “Partners” in Public Health

► **Ruth Gaare Bernheim**, director, University of Virginia Masters of Public Health Program
Lilian Peake, health director, Thomas Jefferson Health District, Virginia

“Who Will Keep the Public Healthy?” Undergraduate students have a meaningful role! During the recent outbreak of the swine/H1N1 influenza, for example, University of Virginia’s Laura McLaughlin, a rising fourth-year undergraduate human biology major, was ready for action. Having taken a number of public health courses, she responded to a request from health district epidemiologist Elizabeth Davies for help on the growing need for public education about H1N1. Laura is now gathering information on flu prevention for summer camps and fitness centers to ensure that adults and children practice healthy habits.

As a dynamic field of study integrating numerous academic disciplines, public health is attracting the energy and commitment of undergraduate students across the nation. Students are drawn to the real-world, problem-solving opportunities for applied learning in which they can use intellectual and practical skills, and express commitments to social justice. Public health officials, who often turn to partnerships to provide additional expertise, staff, and resources, are likewise preparing undergraduates to be new partners through field placements and class projects.

Health department officials at Virginia’s Thomas Jefferson Health District and faculty members at the University of Virginia Master of Public Health Program have

developed a partnership over the last four years that helped prepare Laura McLaughlin for her current role. It began in 2006, when public health officials received grant funding to teach an introductory undergraduate course on community public health.

Successful public health partnerships with undergraduates such as this one require several key elements: student course preparation and skills; clear learning outcomes and field placement objectives; and close faculty mentoring and participation. Laura’s course preparation included not only an introductory course on public health, but also courses on qualitative research methods, including cultural literacy, and health economics and public health data analysis using SPSS. Faculty members currently are developing measurable learning objectives to maximize the educational benefits for students.

Laura McLaughlin has gained much experience in the day-to-day work at the Thomas Jefferson Health District: “The goal of the program I am working on is to equip those who are likely to be in contact with individuals positive for the flu with the proper safety knowledge and equipment. I have discovered that this program is incredibly important, as many people (much as I originally was) are unaware of the differences between surgical masks and respirators and the fact that in many situations a surgical mask does not adequately protect against illness.”

Laura also has new insight about public health in general: “Upon starting my work with the Thomas Jefferson Health Department, I assumed that health officials were testing patients so they would know whether they had H1N1. However, upon discovering that only select individuals who met very strict criteria were being tested, I realized that this was not entirely the case. While public health officials do use the results of these influenza tests to advise patients about appropriate treatment, their goals and objectives in testing are not about establishing individuals’ diagnoses, but rather are about the virus itself. As it is a new virus, public health officials are striving to learn about how it behaves, which will ultimately inform the recommendations they make to protect the public at large. When the outbreak was first identified, the Virginia Department of Health’s recognized criteria for testing included the following questions: Is the virus in Virginia? Is it transmitted from person to person? After affirming both of these questions, the motives for testing shifted to determining if the virus will change, if it will become more virulent, if it will undergo genetic changes, how it will affect some populations particularly vulnerable populations such as young children and pregnant women. It was only with this firsthand experience that I have been able to truly internalize the purpose and unique perspective of public health.” ■