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A New Health Informatics Course: A Funded Collaboration

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Background

Information access is considered critical to the public health workforce, which involves informatics, communication, analytic assessment, and health education (NN/LM Public Health Training Workgroup, 2004). Information-oriented outreach to the public health workforce is challenging to libraries because the public health workforce is made up of diverse health professions and public health personnel are not aware if key information resources are available to them (Cogdill, 2007). The National Library of Medicine (NLM) funded information outreach to the public health workforce projects in different periods of time, which altogether reflect challenges of providing public health professionals with access to electronic health information resources and the importance of establishing partnerships with public health agencies and institutions.

Public health informatics is a recently developed area as a result of the increasing role of computing technology in public health. Yasnoff, O'Carroll, Koo, Linkins, and Kilbourne defined it as "a systematic application of information and computer science and technology to the public health practice, research, and learning" (2000). The populating approach of public health requires public health workers to obtain a large amount of health data about populations and seek responses to tackle various public health problems such as epidemics, environmental health, or disasters. Both public health data and problems are characterized by complexity and variability across geographical areas and the population density. Innovations of Internet technology provide both challenges and opportunities to public health professionals. Public health professionals are able to locate their needed information online and receive further training of various topics through applications of distance learning and multimedia software.

Mississippi is one of the most rural states in the nation. The rural population consists of at least half of the state population (51.2 percent), which means a majority of Mississippians lives in the rural area. Twenty-one counties of 82 counties are classified as 100 percent rural. Health problems are cited as one of reasons that lead to disability and unemployment in the rural area of Mississippi (Logue, 2011). Mississippi is a medically underserved state, so public health services provided by the state department of health and community are crucial to the large number of the rural population (Office of Rural Health, 2007). Even so, there are still many challenges for public health professionals to reach out to the rural population, which is scattered across the state. Mississippi's major health problems are more likely caused by risky behavioral and environmental factors such as tobacco use and sedentary lifestyle than acute infectious diseases, which require more attention and resources from the state health departments to promote community health and education (Office of Health Administration, 2012).

The 21st century public health professionals have to make use of information, data, and technology effectively. And informatics plays a role in public health professionals' core competencies and public health informatics is essential to public health academic programs and jobs (Richards, 2007). This project focuses on an outreach to the graduate students of the Department of Public Health at the University of Southern Mississippi because they will serve in various health settings and tackle serious public health issues including heart problems, obesity, infant mortality, teen birth rate, and natural disasters and environmental issues in Mississippi.

Project

The project—*Strengthening the 21st Century Public Health Informatics Competencies: Outreach to the Future Public Health Professionals at the University of Southern Mississippi*—was funded $20,000 through the National Library of Medicine. It seeks to identify information needs of public health professionals and improve their access to public health information; develop a subject guide for public health information resources and tutorials, and deliver a public health informatics course in a Web-based format. (See Course Spotlight for more information).

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