

## EDITORIAL

### *The First School of Public Health in Mississippi: Challenges and Opportunities*

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### **Introducing the Jackson State University School of Public Health**

Building on its historic mission of empowering diverse students to become leaders in various fields, Jackson State University began a public health program within the School of Allied Health Sciences in 1999. The program, with five concentrations, operated under the Department of Public Health for several years. In anticipation of becoming a School of Public Health, the Department of Public Health was reorganized into three departments, added the Department of Communicative Disorders, and became the School of Health Sciences in 2006.

The Public Health Program, offering MPH and DrPH degrees, was approved as an accredited program by Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) in 2007. The Public Health program received reaffirmation of accreditation in 2014 for seven years. In the same year, the speech-language pathology graduate program in Communicative Disorders applied for re-accreditation and was re-affirmed for eight years. During the same period of time, the student enrollment in the Healthcare Administration program blossomed making the program one of the largest undergraduate programs at the university.

The momentum of hard work and good fortune for Public Health, Communicative Disorders, and Healthcare Administration continued into 2015. With financial and logistic supports from the State of Mississippi, the Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) and Jackson State University, the Jackson State University School of Public Health Initiative was established in the Fall of 2015. The establishment of the School of Public Health Initiative was significant in that it represented collaborative efforts

between the State of Mississippi, IHL and Jackson State University to achieve the first accredited School of Public Health in Mississippi. In December 2016, Jackson State University submitted the application to transition from a public health program to a School of Public Health to CEPH. In February 2017, CEPH approved the application allowing Jackson State University to begin the accreditation process of its School of Public Health. Upon receipt of accreditation (slated for 2018-2019), Jackson State University's School of Public Health will join the other 59 Schools of Public Health that hold this designation, which will make Jackson State University's School the first accredited School of Public Health in Mississippi and the first accredited School of Public Health at a Historically Black College and University. Accreditation by CEPH affirms the quality of educational programs in a School of Public Health so such a designation is a distinction.

### **Framing the Work of the School of Public Health**

In the early 1900s, public health focused on improving sanitation, controlling infectious diseases, and assuring water and food safety. The workforce primarily consisted of nurses, physicians and biological scientists. The purview of public health has tremendously expanded to address the evolving health concerns of the world. Healthy People 2020 (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2017) has a broad agenda for public health that includes increasing quality of life, eliminating health disparities, promoting health for all through a healthy environment, maximizing health, preventing chronic diseases, addressing social determinants of health, addressing aging populations and quality of life, increasing the proportion of children who are ready for school, and improving public health through global disease detection, prevention and control strategies. To address the depth and breadth of these issues, Schools of Public Health must continue to prepare professionals who are inquisitive, knowledgeable and skillful and who seek innovative and collaborative ways to promote health, prevent disease, and protect people. Hernandez, Rosenstock and Gebbie underscores the importance of this in their book, *Who Will Keep the Public Healthy? Educating Public Health Professionals for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*:

Public health professionals of the future will need to understand and be able to use the new information systems that provide the data upon which public health research and practice is based. They will need to be able to communicate with diverse populations, to understand the issues, concerns, and needs of these groups in order to work collaboratively to improve population health. Public health professionals must have the skills and competencies necessary to engage in public health practice at many levels: leadership, management, and supervisory (Hernandez, Rosenstock & Gebbie, 2003).

Guided by Jackson State University's mission of empowering diverse students to become leaders and producing technologically-advanced, diverse, ethical, global leaders who think critically, address societal problems, and compete effectively, the School of Public Health prepares public health professionals, through degree programs in Health Care Administration (BS), Communicative Disorders (BS and MS), MPH degrees in five concentrations (Behavioral Health Promotion/Education, Biostatistics, Epidemiology, Environmental and Occupational Health, Health Policy and Management) and DrPH degrees in three concentrations (Behavioral Health Promotion/Education, Epidemiology, Health Policy and Management), to address the health challenges of the state, nation and world. With Mississippi being among the most unhealthiest and impoverished states in

the nation, our work starts here, focusing on disease prevention and health promotion in our state, but the relevance and importance of our work ensures that it will impact the nation and world.

### **The Current Issue of the *Online Journal of Rural and Urban Research***

This issue of the *Online Journal of Rural and Urban Research* celebrates the accomplishments of Jackson State University's School of Public Health by focusing on health promotion and prevention in public health. This issue contains both research articles and commentaries that address prevention of diseases, disorders, and disabilities; promotion of health and wellness; and prevention-based policies. The research articles reflect qualitative and quantitative research designs.

In the first section of articles, through their own words, we learn about the stigmas, barriers, and discrimination faced by individuals who live with HIV/AIDS and we hear the hearts of former wards of the court to learn about the challenges they faced in the foster care system. Through model-based studies, we learn important predictors of disease diagnoses and use of the health care system. One study examines the effect of political affiliation and racial identity on diabetes and hypertension diagnoses and another study documents predictors of the use of dental care services by Hispanic/Latino adults in three southern states, including Mississippi. The final research article describes a community-based health promotion and intervention program that was designed to reduce hypertension in women who live in urban Mississippi. The results of the pilot study suggest that health promotion and intervention programs can effectively educate and change the beliefs and behaviors of adults.

The second section of articles contains commentaries that describe projects and great ideas about public health. These studies are significant in that they provide road maps for future health promotion and prevention programs and research. The section begins with an article that describes the Community Health Model (CHM), developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and provides examples of community-based programs implemented in various states to address local health challenges. Public health professionals can apply the CHM to communities in Mississippi to design, implement and evaluate similar projects to create community change, improve behavior, eliminate health disparities and achieve health equity. The second commentary discusses how posing a simple question during medical appointments can reduce unplanned pregnancies, improve birth outcomes, and support women's reproductive needs. For a state like Mississippi, which has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancies in the country, adopting the One Key Question® can prove to be beneficial. In the next article, the author argues that treating depression in prevention and intervention programs may prevent and reduce the impact of chronic illnesses.

Together, the next three commentaries describe programs that can be used with parents and within the classroom, and considerations that can be taken at the school district level to prevent language and literacy disabilities in young children. These articles align with Healthy People 2020's objective of increasing the proportion of children who are ready for school. The projects and ideas in these three articles can be combined into a larger initiative in the future to have a population-level effect on the early language and literacy experiences of children in Mississippi – similar to the University of Chicago's Thirty Million Words® Initiative project.

The final paper reminds us that we must always be thinking about recruiting and retaining students, including those from minority backgrounds, into public health fields. It has been argued that reducing and eliminating health disparities also involves addressing the disproportionate representation of males and minorities in the public health workforce in the U.S. through active and innovative recruitment and retention activities. Although this paper uses the fields of communication sciences and disorders as the case example, the suggestions and ideas that are presented can be applied to any public health program.

Scholars and students from Jackson State University, within and outside of the School of Public Health, and from other southern universities contributed to this issue of the *Online Journal of Rural and Urban Research*. These scholars and students are from various areas of public health including social work, sociology, epidemiology, biostatistics, health policy, speech-language pathology, and education. This issue of the *Online Journal of Rural and Urban Research* makes it clear that public health is everywhere and that work from all public health disciplines is needed to promote health and prevent diseases, disorders, and disabilities. To be most impactful in creating a healthier state, nation and world, our work has to cut across programs, schools, universities and work settings. Multidisciplinary, integrated approaches are required to meet the challenges and opportunities of public health.

As we celebrate Jackson State University's School of Public Health, it is our hope that this issue will spark new and innovative ideas of collaborative research and programs. We hope that the ideas presented here will lead to research that is translational and meaningful. We hope that the research that is inspired by this issue will guide policies and legislation that improve the quality of life for all people in Mississippi and beyond. Enjoy!

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **References**

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