Mailman Students Study New York Communities for Insight into Public Health Issues

BY MATTHEW DOUGHERTY

Late in November, Mary-Elizabeth Vachon visited Central Harlem’s Bradhurst section, an area from 139th to 155th Streets between Edgecombe Avenue and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard. The second-year student in the Mailman School of Public Health and Columbia School of Social Work went to Central Harlem to create a map of its supermarkets, delicatessens, and corner grocery stores to help design a study of healthy food choices available to neighborhood residents.

Recent research has underlined the importance of food availability for public health. A paper in the November American Journal of Public Health, co-authored by Ana Diez-Roux, assistant professor of medicine at P&S and epidemiology at Mailman, documented how limited the amount of fruits and vegetables in residents’ diets.

Vachon’s research is but one example of the importance of community-based research efforts undertaken by students in the School of Public Health. Several Public Health classes address community projects, including the seminar, "History of Public Health Decline in Harlem from 1950 to 1990," taught by Beverly Xavier Watkins, assistant professor of clinical public health of Public Health Decline in Harlem from 1950 to 1990," taught by Beverly Xavier Watkins, assistant professor of clinical public health. The class is one of the core courses for a new track in the master of public health program in Mailman’s Department of Sociomedical Sciences. The track, called Urbanism and Community Health, began in fall 2002.

The course requires each student to design and conduct an independent research project. The students also must write multiple, progressively longer drafts of a paper on the research, eventually creating a 30-page paper of publishable quality. Along with the food choice study, the student projects included studies of the history of public housing, prostitution, the policies that impacted employment, the Civil Rights movement, and the policies that impacted public housing.

Watkins says, “The objective is to foster independent thinking and broaden a student’s perspective on public health,” she says. “Students learn to go beyond the individual level to the community level. We’re exploring the connections between behavioral, social, cultural, economic, and environmental determinants of health.”

To demonstrate the importance of historical research techniques in public health, Watkins takes the class on walking tours, showing students the neighborhood of Harlem. The trips, which include a visit to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem (part of the New York Public Library), also introduce students to research around the city, including the Municipal Archives of the City of New York, the New York Historical Society, and the Columbia libraries.

"Doing community health from an ‘armchair’ doesn’t work," Watkins says. Each student works on a research paper throughout the semester, revising and expanding the document with Watkins’ guidance. Students rewrite the papers based upon Watkins’ comments and their continuing research. "By the end of the class, they know how to marshal evidence and build an argument," Watkins says. They develop confidence in their abilities to do research and overcome obstacles.

Even though the course concluded at the end of the fall semester, Watkins continues to advise many of the students, including Vachon, in spring semester tutorials about how to improve the papers for publication. Vachon, for example, is modifying the survey she started in November with elements from a 1991 healthy-food available study done by researchers at the University of Washington.

Sonia Gonzalez, a second-year Mailman student, researched prostitution in Harlem from 1940 to 1969. She used archival materials to track how the criminalization of prostitution, the Civil Rights movement, and the increased use of welfare in the 1960s affected prostitution. Largely due to the dearth of historical information about Harlem, Gonzalez found the research to be the most challenging project she has ever worked on.

"The class heightened my critical thinking skills and provided me with an in-depth understanding of the history of Harlem, the players involved, and the policies that impacted what Harlem looks like today," Gonzalez says.

"Understanding the history and lifeways of a community is vital to understanding public health issues—you need to study people and places simultaneously," Watkins says.

"The course aims to give students skills that will help them as they relate to professional life and the broader community."

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Columbia Announces Plans to Integrate Online Services and Wide-ranging Digital Media

By COLIN MORRIS

Columbia recently announced plans to integrate its online services and wide-ranging digital media. Robert Kasdin, Columbia’s senior executive vice president explained that it was the right time for this reorganization and that the University was committed to developing new technologies and innovative ways of teaching and learning.

As part of the reorganization, Fathom.com, the online site offering digital content from Columbia and 13 other academic and cultural institutions, will cease operations on March 31, 2003. Columbia does hope to continue to work with the consortium partners to pursue new opportunities, and the University will seek to maintain and build upon the relationships with these world-class universities, libraries, museums, and other important institutions.

The reorganization will make Columbia’s Digital Knowledge Ventures (Columbia DKV) the primary venue for exploring digital media as a means of connecting the University, its faculty, schools, and centers with the broader community.

Columbia DKV has been very successful in the creation of innovative digital resources on behalf of the University. Over 100 e-seminars have been created by Columbia DKV and made available for use in Columbia’s curriculum and beyond. The award-winning Columbia Interactive site created by Columbia DKV has been a very useful resource used by faculty, students, and the public-at-large. That record of innovation and benefit to Columbia and other audiences will continue.

In the course of its future work, Columbia DKV will coordinate its efforts with other centers of digital media innovation at the University, including the following:

• The Center for New Media Teaching and Learning works with faculty to advance the effective use of technology in the educational programs at Columbia. Since 1999, the Center has collaborated with 1,300 teachers from across the University to construct course Web sites and to advance applications of new digital media to teaching and learning.

• The Electronic Publishing Initiative at Columbia (EPIC) creates new kinds of scholarly and education publications through the use of new media technologies and carries out research on academic publishing.

• The Libraries Digital Program is focused on effective access to electronic resources, the creation of new specialized digital collections drawn from the library historical collections, and the organization of a depository for a number of interlibrary loan and reference tools.

• Columbia University’s Health Sciences has produced a number of interactive, learning and reference tools.

• And the Media Center for Art History and Historic Preservation works with faculty on the integration of digital visual resources into University courses.