

# Voices Through Time: An Oral History of the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse Health Education and Health Promotion Department

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## ABSTRACT

The primary goal of the research was to complete the oral history of the UW-La Crosse Health Education and Health Promotion (HEHP) Department and house it with other university oral histories in Murphy Library. The interviews revealed a timeline of significant changes, some unique features of the program and faculty, and interviewees' predictions for the future of the program and the field of health education and promotion. This information was used in creating an informational brochure and a Microsoft Power Point presentation to be attached to the department home page. Both will aid in marketing the program to graduate and undergraduate students.

## INTRODUCTION

The research for this project was done upon request of the chair of the department, Dr. Dan Duquette, and turned into a tool for reflection and evaluation by the authors. The realization of a declining number of both Community Health Education (CHE) and School Health Education (SHE) majors brought about the need for a way to better market the program to undergraduate and graduate students. In a dynamic setting, such as a public university, it is a struggle to find a way to reflect upon the past, to evaluate former changes, and to comfortable voice thoughts on the future. The information in this research can be used to help others understand the profession of health education and promotion, understand this department's touted reputation in the field, and for current faculty and newcomers to answer the question, "Where do we go from here?"

The nature of this project is unique to other research done regarding programs in HEHP at other universities. However, a review of the literature was conducted to reveal the rise of higher education and the rise of public health education in this society. It was found that there is currently an emphasis on increasing diversity among staff and the student body in higher education. (Louisiana 1994) Dr. Justin Odulana revealed his main reason for coming to UW-La Crosse was this university's unique plan for increasing the presence and retention of minority students and minority faculty members, called Plan 2008. Further, higher education has sought over the years, but must still keep working toward, meeting the needs of its diversified student body. Historically, higher education has paid little attention to the attitudes and expectations of students. (Silver 1982) The UW-La Crosse HEHP department has consistently requested feedback from students, community members, school districts, and preceptorship (internship) sites regarding the quality of preparation and the need for any improvements.

The development of public health in our society is similar to that of higher education, in that its focus is on an entire population of people. The rise of public health began with

attempts to control the outbreak of communicable disease in the 18th Century and the first half of the 19th Century. It moved toward a focus on public responsibility to ensure environmental sanitation and the promotion of individual health during the 20th Century, and is currently focused for the 21st Century on the prevention of illness and injury and the promotion of health education in the schools. (Lee 1997; Fitch & Blue, 1982) Programs have risen in schools through the interaction between community public health providers and school health educators to promote the understanding of what health education is, whom it is for, and who should provide it. (National 1980) As a result, university programs, like that of UW-La Crosse, have a responsibility to educate students on the three-pronged training needs of community health educators/promoters: (1) traditional content in health education, (2) health education/health promotion skills, methods, and approaches, (3) management and administrative skills. (Timmerreck & Cole 1989) Further, HEHP students need to gain expertise in defining target populations and their health education needs and clearly stating educational and program objectives, rather than choosing only the "hottest" health/safety issues of the moment. (Mohammed 1983; McDermott 2000) These topics, among others, were addressed in the interviews.

The suspected outcomes for this research included: adding the interviews to those already housed in Murphy Library from other departments on campus, finding unique and positive aspects of the program that would bring it recognition, creating a time line of significant events and changes through the years, and making a quality comparison of the development of this department to others in the country. The latter outcome was broadly addressed during the interviews, so only a general comparison to the information in the previous paragraph was available.

## **METHODS**

Working within the guidelines of the UW-L Oral History Program, we began contacting each member of the HEHP faculty by electronic mail and asking for volunteers to participate in the project. We received seven positive responses and set up interviews over the course of two semesters. Each interview was tape-recorded, and proper legal documentation (i.e. informed consent papers, release of rights forms) was obtained. Before each interview, individuals were sent a list of the following discussion themes: (1) personal history, (2) evolution of the department over time, (3) evolution of the curriculum, (4) a description of the relationship of the department to the rest of the university and to the community, (5) observations of any demographic changes in students enrolled in the program. These themes were used to prompt discussion lasting from approximately thirty minutes to approximately seventy minutes. The taped interviews were then copied, indexed for content, and will be transcribed verbatim and published for housing in Murphy Library. The content from the interviews was used to create a Microsoft Power Point presentation that can be attached to the department's home page. It was also used to create a promotional brochure (using Microsoft Publisher software) that will draw undergraduate and/or graduate students to the program. A poster presentation highlighting major changes, unique aspects of the department, and predictions for the future was also created and presented at the UW-La Crosse Celebration of Undergraduate Research.

## RESULTS

The interviews revealed three basic periods of evolution or change: (1) 1970's – early 1980's, (2) late 1980's – early 1990's, (3) late 1990's – present. The first era, coined "The Hay Day" by Dr. Richard Detert, was filled with community action and workshops, and the department created a reputation of excellence among top professionals in the field of HEHP. In 1978, students enrolled in the program numbered approximately three hundred. Two of the faculty interviewed, Detert and Dr. Leslie Oganowski, were hired during this time. 1983 marked the retirement of an energetic department chair, which moved the department into the second era of evolution. Detert described this time as a "period of dormancy," as the change in leadership prompted a new focus to surface. There was less community involvement on a professional level and fewer workshops done for school districts or other community entities. According to Duquette, the department began to do a lot of work internally on the program's curriculum. The department began to prepare CHE students for Community Health Education Specialist (CHES) certification, and Dr. Mark Kelley stated the "portfolio approach" was adopted in 1994. The portfolio approach is a graduation requirement for majors in both CHE and SHE that illustrates how the responsibilities and competencies of an entry-level health educator have been met. This approach came about as a result of state and national standards in health education, but was adapted by the department to fit its needs, explained Kelley. The third era of evolution, beginning about 1995 and including the present, is an era of grant writing, independent research by faculty, and full class loads. The number of full-time faculty has decreased over time from thirteen to eight, and the number of students enrolled has decreased to approximately one hundred seventy. The retirement of faculty during the second era brought in three new full-time professors in 1998. With the help of these new members, the department implemented new, more "streamlined" reports Dr. Jack Curtis, SHE curriculum in 2001. Despite hiring new faculty, each person interviewed commented on the stress of over-extension. This is, the necessity of meeting classroom, research, and professional requirements of the university. With the retirement of Dr. Detert in May of 2002, and the expected retirement of Dr. Curtis in the near future, the concern of over-extension is elevated.

Interviews revealed a number of unique features of the program that were used in creating promotional materials. The department currently boasts the only SHE major in the state of Wisconsin. Both the CHE and SHE programs are credited for their strength in content, while maintaining a process approach to educating students, said Duquette. The faculty associated with CHE (Duquette, Odulana, and Kelley) reported that the three-pronged approach (described in the review of the literature) to preparing health educators is used at UW-La Crosse. If there is one weakness in student preparation, faculty consistently reported a limited experience with the third prong – management and administrative skills. Duquette explained that the limitation occurs in order to keep credit numbers down so majors can graduate in four to five years. Experience in administrative and management techniques is supposed to occur during the CHE preceptorship (internship) and the SHE student teaching or internship experience. Duquette said of the entire preparation experience, "Our program prepares professionals to assist communities in moving toward the adoption of health habits and lifestyles." Further, he explains that this program is unofficially ranked as one of the top ten of more than three hundred programs throughout the United States.

Unique and positive features of the department are also found in the eight full-time faculty members. All eight of them have doctorates in Health Education, and Dr. Oganowski commented that this is highly unusual. The faculty pool is diverse in ethnicity and previous

experiences, and each person was hired on the basis of his/her area of expertise (i.e. adolescent health issues, disease prevention, human sexuality education, etc.). This is a hiring process unusual at the university level, confirmed Oganowski. Additionally, the HEHP department is credited with developing the "1 credit weekend workshop." Detert explained that these classes were originally developed at the requests of school districts and community members, illustrating the positive relationship this department has developed outside of the university. The relationship, however, is not the same among other colleges and departments on campus. Despite the excellent reputation nationwide of the program in the field of health education, recognition and collaboration with others at the university is lacking. All of the individuals interviewed named "university politics" and a lack of general communication across campus as contributing to the deficiency.

Discussion regarding person predictions for the future was divided between three general topic areas: (1) changes in faculty, (2) changes in the role of faculty, (3) changes in the field of health education. Changes in faculty, with two recent retirements, will prove the most challenging. According to Kelley, there will definitely be a period of instability while newcomers work their way into the system and generate new ideas and views. Duquette and Detert both predicted changes in roles of faculty that will include more in-service and public service projects that provide educational opportunities to other entities. These projects will also give CHE organizations and schools new curricular tools to work with. There seemed to be an overall trend in the interviews toward the desire to step back into the first era of evolution, the "Hay Day." Kelley predicted one change that will occur in the field of health education will be dealing with the outbreak of infectious diseases again (due to globalization), rather than the major focus being solely on the personal prevention of disease and illness. Odulana predicted that health education would become a branch of law enforcement, as numerous state and federal laws currently deal with health and safety issues. Curtis predicted that increasing numbers of people will become interested in HEHP because of its focus on prevention and the rising costs of health care in this country. Additionally, he has recently laid the groundwork for a class in eastern medicinal practices to be added to the curriculum, and he predicted more classes similar to this one will be present in the future.

## **DISCUSSION**

Overall, our findings contained information that related to and deviated from the themes for the interviews. Such is the nature of an oral history project, as researchers have a limited amount of control over discussion. An important discovery for the future of the program was the decreasing number of enrolled students and the decreased amount of community involvement. What was once a very visible entity within the field of health education is currently discreet and confined. Yet, as new discoveries in health education emerge, and as new faculty is hired in the department, the interviewees voiced positive changes for the future. While discussions had a tendency to deviate from the original research goals, information was obtained for practical purposes. Overall, it was observed that members of the HEHP department have a positive attitude toward reflecting on the past and documenting ideas for the future.

## **LIMITATIONS**

In some ways, the process of conducting research with interviews can be a limitation. Because questions are subject to interpretation, control over what information is revealed is limited, and objective data (i.e. dates, names, specific events) is obtained from the memories

of those interviewed, certain information may be skewed or unobtainable. Yet, the same process allows thoughts and opinions to be expressed, free of controls and constraints. A major limitation to the research was the loss of Dr. Gary Gilmore's interview during the copying process. Dr. Gilmore is a current member of the faculty who has been there the longest period of time. There was information in his interview that could not be provided by others. The eventual inclusion of his interview to those published and bound in Murphy Library is strongly suggested.

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