Chapter 18

The Tennessee Public Health Workforce Development Consortium:
A Multi-Campus Model of Online Learning for the Public Good

Aleshia Hall-Campbell
University of Tennessee Health Science Center, USA

Pamela Connor
University of Tennessee Health Science Center, USA

Nathan Tipton
University of Tennessee Health Science Center, USA

David Mirvis
University of Tennessee Health Science Center, USA

ABSTRACT

From 2003 to 2009, the Tennessee Public Health Workforce Development Consortium (The Consortium) served as a multi-institutional collaborative effort to develop and implement academic continuing professional education programs for public health professionals in Tennessee. The Consortium included the Tennessee Department of Health (DOH), East Tennessee State University (ETSU), the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UTK), and the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis (UTHSC). Utilizing online, distance education techniques and technologies to provide graduate level certificate programs in epidemiology, health system leadership and health care management, as well as a Master of Public Health (MPH) degree to meet the specific needs of DOH’s professional staff, the Consortium successfully implemented an innovative, cross-institutional model for the provision of public health education. The online technology not only facilitated the use of active learning approaches appropriate for older adult learners who are returning to academic work, but also helped students and faculty meet the challenges of learning and teaching across multiple, geographically distant sites. This

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HISTORY OF THE TENNESSEE PUBLIC HEALTH WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT CONSORTIUM

Prior to 2003, when the Tennessee DOH launched the Tennessee Public Health Workforce, no school of public health existed in the state, creating a significant education gap that limited capacity for the state to address health disparity issues. Complicating this educational shortfall was the high percentage of Tennessee DOH’s upper-to-middle level managers who were eligible for retirement, resulting in a large workforce with no formal training in public health. Tennessee’s unfortunate situation has been repeated across the nation (e.g., Honoré, Graham, Garcia, & Morris, 2008; Draper, Hurley, & Lauer, 2008; Lichtveld & Cioffi, 2003; Turnock, 2003; Morse, 2003), and has been made further challenging due to Tennessee residents who continue to exhibit and report poor health status. These combined public health related issues—along with the events of September 11, 2001—prompted the Tennessee DOH to create the Consortium as a joint curricular venture that would recognize and meet the challenges of potential threats posed by newly emerging diseases and bioterrorism, as well as enhance the capabilities of Tennessee DOH staff to meet current and future public health challenges.

The Tennessee DOH approached these challenges by joining with three academic campuses across the state to form the Consortium in 2003 to develop and implement advanced professional education programs specifically for Tennessee DOH professional employees. This Consortium concept became the first collaboration between the DOH and universities in Tennessee, bringing together for the first time the complementary skills of a state government agency (DOH) and three universities within two independent systems: the Tennessee Board of Regents (ETSU) and the University of Tennessee system (UTK and UTHSC) located across the state. The graduate educational programs, including student tuition, fees and course development support, were funded by a contract from the Tennessee DOH with the academic units. The first class was enrolled in January 2004.

Central to the success of the Consortium was the use of online technology, which was important for both educational and practical reasons. For example, for older students who were returning to academia and resuming their studies, the online format promoted active-learning approaches. These approaches also included the cross-institutional discussion board function within the BlackBoard system, which was used to provide prompt assessment and feedback interactions among students and faculty. In addition, given the geography of Tennessee and the location of the partnering institutions in Memphis, Knoxville, and Johnson City (see Figure 1), the use of technology also allowed DOH employees from across the state to participate without the travel required for convening trainings in a traditional classroom setting. Furthermore, the use of predominantly asynchronous teaching methods that did not require faculty/student coordination allowed flexibility in learning times and allowed students to continue with their full-time positions. Finally, the technology expanded the opportunities for students to interact with faculties with complementary expertise from the three universities.

The Tennessee Public Health Workforce Development Consortium

chapter describes the central role technology played in the project in terms of fostering inter-organizational cooperation and collaboration and providing measurable educational impact. The chapter also illustrates the project’s role in forming community partnerships, as well as explaining the best practices/strategies learned from this project.
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