

Community Health educators demonstrate versatility as job demand soars

by Megan Wieser
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EDWARDSVILLE - Demand is increasing rapidly for graduates of a **Southern Illinois University Edwardsville** degree program that revolves around prevention education. Alumni of the Community Health Education program in the SIUE School of Education, Health and Human Behavior can be found in all corners of the world sharing their unique knowledge and skill sets.



The program has formed such culturally competent individuals as Jacksonville native Brianna Bland, BS'15. As the first SIUE program graduate to be accepted into the Peace Corps, Bland traveled this week to Fiji to begin training as a youth development volunteer.

“Experiencing and learning a different culture other than my own has been a dream of mine since I became a community health education major,” said Bland. “I remember the advice I received while working on my senior project at SIUE – ‘Do not buy a house. Do not buy a car. Move away. Travel. Just go!’ I knew then that traveling out of the country to be a health educator was the right move for me.”

While in Fiji, Bland will work on the Community Youth Empowerment project. Her duties will include working on the prevention of non-communicable diseases and infectious diseases, strengthening maternal and child health, system enhancement and capacity building.

“The Community Health Education program at SIUE is for someone who is passionate about helping people and making a positive change in people’s health,” explained Nicole Klein, PhD, associate professor of community health education at the University. “We focus on social behavioral sciences and the top determinants of death and disability – heart disease, diabetes, cancer, injuries, violence, drug use and abuse, infectious diseases, sexual risk taking and mental illnesses.



“It’s all about prevention. We prepare undergraduate students to coach individual and community strategies to improve health and prevent disease and disabilities. We prepare them to advocate for health policy change and reduce health disparities among populations.”

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the job outlook is growing faster than average and demand for health educators is expected to grow 21 percent by 2022. Klein attributes the substantial growth to healthcare costs.

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Klein said. “As the cost of treatment continues to increase, insurers, the federal government and the healthcare field will look to prevention. Our students and graduates want to do something proactive, versus waiting until health issues develop.”

The job titles of individuals who achieve a degree in community health education cover a wide scope of professional positions.

“I recently used social media to ask our alumni – where are you now?” added Klein. “We received an overwhelming response, and I was so impressed to learn how varied and far reaching their commitments are. Many are working in and positively impacting the St. Louis/Metro East region, while numerous others are working across the world.”

Program alums have gone on to work as patient educators, family planning counselors, corporate wellness program coordinators, health officials in federal, state and local public health departments, grant writers, public disaster preparedness coordinators among numerous other professions.

As demand for these qualified individuals grows in the U.S. and internationally, the program at SIUE also continues to expand. Klein says the University is in the process of preparing a master’s in public health in order to further advance students’ levels of competencies in this field.