

## **Public Health E-Mentoring: An Investment for the Next Millennium**

In the effort to connect students with practicing professionals early in their studies, public health schools and programs have integrated field experience opportunities into their curricula.<sup>1</sup> However, according to the Association of Schools of Public Health, there are a number of time- and cost-intensive challenges in enabling scholarly practice, such as establishing linkages with the community and expanding community partners. Therefore, other formal or informal strategies should be explored.<sup>2</sup>

One convenient, efficient, cost-effective, and easy-to-use method would be an electronic

mentoring (“e-mentoring”) program. An example is MentorNet (College of Engineering, San Jose State University, One Washington Sq, San Jose, CA 95192-0080), an electronic industrial mentoring program for female undergraduate and graduate students in engineering and related sciences established in 1996.

Women in Engineering Programs and Advocates Network, the nonprofit organization that administers and governs MentorNet, found 4 primary advantages of a national e-mentoring program over locally based programs. First, the larger the pool of participants, the more diversity and suitable matches. Second, students are not limited to organizations located in their school’s geographical area. Third, economies of scale offer schools relief from the costs of administering their own programs. Fourth, a national program can be evaluated for the development of best practices.

The first National Public Health Student–Mentor Program pilot study (see Mahayonsand and Stigler<sup>2</sup>) showed that 52% of communications were conducted through e-mail. Therefore, e-mentoring can enhance this program in the following ways: (1) Participants can complete a Web-based application on which they state their matching criteria; (2) matches can be made in a central, national database; (3) important mentoring literature can be posted on a single Web site; (4) interventions can be posted on the Web to allow more time for individual consultation; (5) more time is available to design local and national participant social events; and (6) the program can ultimately match pairs year-round.

The National Public Health Student–Mentor Program has 2 major shortcomings: lack of on-site operational support and lack of funding. Student volunteers from more than a dozen schools throughout the nation conducted the pilot study with a budget of approximately \$400 in donations. Successful programs such as MentorNet and Electronic Emissary (College of Education, University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712) can be easily replicated. The latter, established in 1993, is believed to be the longest-running Internet-based telementoring and research effort serving kindergarten through 12th-grade students and teachers.

In addition, funds can be secured through grants or endorsing partners (e.g., MentorNet draws from partners who commit \$10 000 to \$50 000 per year for 3 years). Initial grant funds would enable the National Public Health Student–Mentor Program to design a Web site and program infrastructure, establish evaluation methods, and obtain staff and an advisory board, publications, equipment, and licenses. Once the foundation is set, the program can seek industrial partners and ultimately be self-sufficient.

If incremental success is to be experienced, support is necessary. While volunteer-

ing as a mentor is important, organizing or funding a viable e-mentoring program is crucial. Technology allows us to e-mentor, so what are we waiting for—the next millennium? □

*Ponn P. Mahayonsand, MPH*

---

The author is with the City of Hartford Health Department, Hartford, Conn.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Ponn P. Mahayonsand, MPH, City of Hartford Health Department, 131 Coventry St, Hartford, CT 06112 (e-mail: pmahayonsand@hotmail.com).

---

## References

1. *Strong Schools, Strong Partners: A Report on Practice Activities of Schools of Public Health*. Washington, DC: Association of Schools of Public Health; 1999.
2. Mahayonsand PP, Stigler MH. The need for mentoring in public health [letter]. *Am J Public Health*. 1999;89:1262–1263.