Partners in Public Health: Helping communities like Colquitt County prepare for the health care challenges ahead
Letter from the Dean

The College of Public Health is developing and nurturing many different partnerships and collaborations to improve health and lives in Georgia and beyond. One good example is the College’s growing relationship with the Archway Partnership, a story told in this issue of Public Health.

Archway, a public service and outreach unit of UGA, connects Georgia communities to a full range of university resources to help address their most critical economic development needs. The College began partnering with Archway in 2007 specifically to address public health needs in participating communities. This led to Archway/CPH projects in Washington, Colquitt and Clayton counties staffed by Archway Public Health Professionals trained by the CPH. The expansion of this joint program accelerated the creation of the College’s own Office of Outreach and Engagement (OOE) directed by Associate Dean Dr. Marsha Davis.

We are building and strengthening connections with health professionals throughout Georgia in numerous other ways. For example, the College sponsors the State of Public Health Conference, OOE’s signature annual event. Its purpose is to bring Georgia’s public health stakeholders together to assess the state’s most pressing public health issues in a collaborative environment and to create a realistic plan of action for the year ahead.

In terms of curriculum development, the College has also taken a collaborative, highly interdisciplinary approach by developing degree programs with other colleges at UGA. The College now boasts five joint degree programs created through partnerships outside the College: the PharmD/MPH (with the UGA College of Pharmacy); the MSW/MPH (with the UGA School of Social Work); the MD/MPH (with Georgia Regents University); the DVM/MPH (with the UGA College of Veterinary Medicine); and the MBA/MPH (with the UGA Terry College of Business).

The College also benefits materially from an interdisciplinary approach to research. Our PIs understand that for many grant opportunities, the College of Public Health can be the catalyst for projects involving multiple disciplines. In FY2013, eleven successful research proposals involved our faculty working in collaboration with faculty in seven other UGA units. In this way we are forging close research ties with other units like the College of Family and Consumers Sciences, the College of Education, the Terry College of Business and multiple departments in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences.

In this collaborative context, including partnerships with other institutions in the U.S. and the world, the College brought more than $8 million to the Georgia economy in new research funding for FY2013. This is the highest amount obtained annually by our faculty since the College’s founding. We credit a significant part of this outcome to the capabilities and hard work of our interdisciplinary partners within and outside the University.

Sincerely,
Phillip L. Williams, Ph.D.
For starters, those gathered five years ago for a joint meeting of Colquitt County’s Rotary and Kiwanis clubs didn’t have a clear understanding of what “public health” was, let alone how it impacted them.

Dr. Phillip Williams, the dean of the University of Georgia’s College of Public Health, was in town to talk about how the institution was working to serve the state of Georgia, as well as provide a glimpse of the health status in the community these leaders called home.

Watson, the public health professional heading up the Archway Partnership project in the community, recalled the crowd’s disbelief as Williams ticked off troubling statistic after troubling statistic, noting the deterrent obesity plays in economic development and the crushing health care costs associated with chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease and other liver and kidney ailments. The state’s data were troubling enough, but Colquitt County was facing the same challenges at an even more magnified level.

The rural community’s residents are predominantly low-income, have higher obesity rates than most parts of Georgia, and rank at the bottom in most key health indicators.

“He explained to them this was a crisis and if we stay on the course we’re on now, we’re heading to a place without economic opportunity and mired by chronic health disease,” Watson said. “The statistics were startling, and it got everyone’s attention.”

The news was bleak, but there was hope attached to that message – the College, working through an invitation from the community’s leaders, was going to not only do the research and train the workers needed to combat this challenge, but also directly provide the resources, support and guidance for communities like Colquitt County to begin the work of changing their future.

A conference for citizens of Colquitt County by university officials on how “public health” impacts their community.
Watson said the fact that key leaders, such as the Dean, were visible in the community demonstrated that the College was making an investment in Colquitt County. Since that initial presentation, Williams has made a point to schedule annual trips to both share the work of the College, and garner feedback from the community on what’s working and not working from a programmatic level.

The College worked with the already successful Archway Partnership in Colquitt County in response to the community’s request for assistance. Launched in 2005, Archway works with various “portal” counties in Georgia through which communities gain the wealth of faculty and student expertise who in turn gain practical experience outside of the classroom.

In Colquitt County, the College began implementing a variety of programs aimed at increasing physical activity, changing lifestyles, and ultimately reversing the perilous path the community had been on.

“There is a sense of trust that’s been established during the past five or six years the College has been here,” Watson said. “Often when someone like a big university would come in, they’d do the work and then go back, and you never see their face again. With Archway and what the College is doing here, you’re seeing the same faces over and over and that builds trust in the community partners.”

That trust has led to a remarkable turnaround for Colquitt County, not just from a health status standpoint (since focusing on public health, the community has consistently improved its overall standing in the Partner Up! For Public Health rankings) but also in its sense of community pride and civic engagement.

That’s the type of work Dean Williams wants the College to be known for: a mixture of research, outreach and service that enables UGA resources to be used to improve the lives of all Georgians.

The Colquitt County success story also succinctly encapsulates the essence of one of the University’s most crucial relationships with the state of Georgia, which is that of a land-grant institution serving communities across the state. That notion of using ongoing research and academic resources to serve the residents of the state has been embraced by the College.

“In our core, we are committed to providing that type of service and benefit, and as we developed the College of Public Health it was important for us to have outreach and service be one of our core missions,” Williams said. “In order to do that, we need to work in the communities where people live, so it’s a natural step for our faculty and students to get involved in communities.”

A history of outreach and service

This sense of serving communities in need has its roots in the needs of the economy of the 1800s. The predominantly agrarian economy of 100 years ago was focused on crop yield and irrigation with cotton, rice and peanuts driving the South. Then as now, the agricultural industry served as one of the nation’s premier economic engines with the plantations, farms and rural communities that spanned the country serving as its fuel.

Institutions of higher education, however, were not equipped to provide the educational opportunities for those reared on farm life, nor were they able to funnel the resources and support to the rural communities that would benefit the most from such assistance. To remedy this, the Morrill Act of 1862 provided funding to educational institutions by granting federal land to the states that could be sold or developed to raise money to establish “land-grant” colleges.

These new institutions were designed as a direct response to shifting social classes following the Industrial Revolution and were devoted to practical education such as agriculture, military science and engineering. As the official land-grant institution for Georgia, the University worked through entities like the College of Agriculture and the Cooperative Extension Service to provide the much-needed training, support and resources to farming communities across the state.

“One of the things that really impressed me in coming to the University was the commitment it had to improving the lives of the people of Georgia,” Williams said. “I think that notion of service is much more engrained here than at other universities, at least others I’ve seen. It originates from the agricultural mission Georgia has.”

Williams pointed to the work of the Cooperative Extension Services to enhance agricultural productivity and bolster the quality of life for farm families and rural communities. Upon becoming the first dean of the College, he embraced the 21st century vision articulated by UGA President Michael Adams and made it a priority to modernize the land-grant mission so public health could be considered one of its central tenants of service to the state.

Though progress has been made in recent years, Georgia has ranked toward the bottom nationally in several key public health indicators. The state has one of the highest childhood obesity rates in the U.S.,

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while incidences of diabetes, heart disease and other chronic diseases are frighteningly high.

Georgia spends roughly $2.4 billion annually on obesity-related health care costs. In the next decade, per year in additional health care expenses to cover these extra costs.

“arthe land grant mission, as has the economy and society of Georgia, has changed during the past 100 years,” Williams said. “One of the things we began to see was the need to provide some outreach and assistance to support the overall health of the state’s population. The University already had the infrastructure in place, and it was imperative for the College, as well as the broader University community, to find a way to best utilize that infrastructure so we could improve the health of Georgians, all Georgians, as part of an expanded land-grant mission for the 21st century.”

By expanding and, in essence, modernizing that original mission through established, successful programs and organizations like the Cooperative Extension Service and Archway, the College has been able to reach out to communities across Georgia to provide support for the public health workforce and conduct intervention programs that yield substantive data and are working to reverse the course.

Most importantly, much of this work is being done in communities where the assistance is most needed.

“I think you have to do it in the communities to have a real impact,” Williams said. “There’s a limit to what you can do from Athens or Atlanta. Sure, you can attend trainings some other place, learn something there and take it back and use it. To have the most effect, you need to be there and be engrained and entrenched in those communities.”

The balance of research and outreach

As the College has diligently worked to fulfill its obligations to the land-grant mission, it has placed an emphasis on the value of conducting research to better inform how to craft programs and other outreach efforts aimed at improving health outcomes.

In many disciplines, this presents an inherent challenge as modern society increasingly prefers immediate gratification and quick solutions. Many types of scientific research, however, must proceed at their own pace and can take months, sometimes years, to compile. Additionally, turnover in faculty, students and staff can hinder the development of a bond between a community and the research team.

However, the nature of public health research actually helps to fuel engagement. Dr. Marsha Davis, associate dean for outreach and engagement at the College, said providing something tangible and real to the community — in essence, a return on investment — was crucial to not just the success of a project, but also the willingness of a community to actively engage in the work.

“It’s particularly important to public health because unlike some applied sciences where there’s just a continuum of research from laboratory to application, you often have to transition that research into the field,” Davis said. “For public health, by our very nature, we do research that is directly applied to improve the public’s health and it’s critical we do this. For our research to be effective, we have to make it applicable and relatable to communities.”

While the research ultimately will yield valuable data that will inform future outreach efforts, it also provides some short-term benefits for its participants.

One prominent example of this is Dr. Mark Wilson’s research with workplace populations. In an attempt to impact obesity rates and reduce employer health care costs, Wilson is leading an intervention program in three different cities in Georgia where public employees will participate in a six-month weight management program.

Relying on “health coaches” who provide counsel and educational support to participants, the goal is to change the lifestyles of each individual through three versions of the program. In the long term, the data gathered from the program will help employers craft wellness programs that can improve the well-being of their employees, boost worker productivity and safety, and potentially lower corporate health care costs.

Yet, as Wilson noted, regardless of the findings of the research, the immediate benefit for the employees is the exposure to better nutritional habits and physical fitness.

The College has countless other research and outreach projects underway with College faculty, staff and students leading the charge to strengthen communities and enact positive change. Dr. Phaedra Corso, a professor in health policy and management, is part of a research and intervention study focusing on two-parent African American families in rural areas. Dr. Chris Whalen, a professor in epidemiology, has spent much of his time studying tuberculosis in Uganda, identifying methods and strategies that could be employed locally to curb TB outbreaks in the U.S.

Like the ongoing work in Colquitt County, these projects are examples of meaningful and impactful research being conducted by faculty and students at the College both in Georgia and across the globe. Projects like these are collecting essential data that can inform researchers how to not only improve the situations in these various communities, but also ways to maximize those tried and tested models on a larger scale.

The research also complements outreach and engagement by striving for
answers and identifying best practices. If various intervention programs are deemed ineffective, that information may potentially point the way to a new strategy. Likewise, if a project offered positive outcomes, the publication of that research can give other communities a blueprint for success.

In Colquitt County, Watson said long-term benefits were promising, but the fact researchers were visible in the community provided an immediate sense of ease, fostering engagement among the population. While it might take an entire generation to begin to move the needle on various health indicators in the community, the notion that faculty, staff and students from the College were working alongside residents to turn things around made the task seem a little less daunting.

Building a story of success in Colquitt County

For Watson, success is built on trust. As a resident of Colquitt County, she said she knows how vital it is for there to be an active collaboration between the College and the people of her community. It’s the local “buy-in” that ultimately will make any project profitable.

“This is my home, and I see these people on a regular basis,” she said. “I go to church with them. I shop at the same places they do. I socialize with them. So they know who I am, and that gives our residents a local contact they know and trust whom they can turn to if they need something.”

Colquitt County was the first Archway community in the state, working with representatives from various parts of the University to identify strategic goals on a whole host of issues ranging from high school graduation rates to economic growth. Roughly seven years ago, the community identified another area where they needed help—their health.

Upon recognizing the need for assistance, Archway reached out to the College for a way to right the community’s health wrongs.

And that’s when Dean Williams came to visit.

Since that initial conversation, the College has been actively engaged in Colquitt County, relying on a host of intervention projects to both better understand the community’s health challenges and move past the existing, readily-identifiable obstacles.

To get fresh, healthy foods into low-income areas of the county, food trucks deliver fresh produce free of charge. Thanks to a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the YMCA of the U.S., a walk-to-school initiative is getting more children and their parents physically active. The College has hosted “lunch-and-learns” for public health workers and other local leaders to equip them with the tools they need to combat the community’s health challenges.

Recently, Davis received a grant from the USDA to help teach children how to be “change agents” that could systematically change the lifestyles and behaviors of their parents and guardians in the community. And Watson said she was optimistic Colquitt County would be selected for a grant to fund a workplace intervention program for the community’s employers.

The community has rallied behind these efforts because not only is it the right thing to do, but it also could mean the difference between long-term economic prosperity or generational despair.

“We preach economic development down here because we need more jobs,” Watson said. “But there’s a price tag associated with public health because a healthy workforce is going to help you recruit employers. If you can demonstrate that you have that, you’re setting yourself up for success and growth.”

It’s the economic message that strongly appealed to the community’s business leaders, fostering the leadership and commitment needed to effectively tackle what, on the surface at least, appeared to be an insurmountable task. Because of that commitment, a spirit of collaboration has enabled the College, through Archway, to leverage local resources to attract additional funding for research and outreach in Colquitt County.

“What’s happening in Colquitt County is amazing and we could not be doing the work we’re doing without the community’s support,” Davis said. “UGA could not have received funding for the USDA grant, for instance, without support from the community. Our reviewers noted that with support from the community, the project could be guaranteed success and sustainability.”

Making a difference in the long-term

There’s no doubt that something special is happening in Colquitt County.

Davis said the level of trust between the researchers from the College and the leaders in the community is one of the many points of pride she feels from the relationship.

“What makes me most proud is that when I go to a place like Colquitt County, I feel like I’m going home,” Davis said. “And, the University is not seen as a foreboding place that is an ivory tower and isn’t relatable to the work needed by the community. We’ve accomplished a lot. Colquitt County came to the University with their needs, and what makes me most proud is that we’ve worked together as a team to address those community needs.”

That sense of collaboration and unity is what makes Colquitt County, and the other research and outreach endeavors of the College, so successful.

“The people we’ve worked with from Colquitt County are a wonderful group who are really working to improve the lives of the people in that community,” said Williams. “They want to create a community where people will be born there, grow up there and build a strong community in Colquitt. To do that, they have to improve the community they live in now and make it even better to attract more people. They’re doing that.

We learn a lot from them, and as with many outreach efforts like this one, I truly believe we learn more from them than they do from us. And that’s the real moral of this story.”