The Public Health Leadership Program (PHLP) hosted a first-ever “Gathering” on April 11, 2014, that brought together students, faculty and alumni from around the world in an on-site and online hybrid event. Making use of a newly-outfitted classroom in McGavran-Greenberg Hall, and with support from the Gillings School of Global Public Health Alumni Association, the event focused on connectivity, providing an introduction to technological resources as well as a chance to connect, and reconnect, with others in the PHLP.

Rohit Ramaswamy, Clinical Associate Professor in the PHLP and Director of the Center for Global Learning at the Gillings School of Global Public Health, led the group from his hotel room in Zambia. (The original plan had been to orchestrate the event from McGavran-Greenberg, but that changed when Dr. Ramaswamy was called away to a series of meetings in Africa.) Using the Adobe Connect software, and with help from the School’s IT team, he was able to address participants in the classroom and online, limited only by the finite bandwidth he could access in Zambia.

“Every year we look for new opportunities to connect our students and alumni,” said Frellick, Leadership Program Coordinator for the PHLP, who along with alumna Carol Breland and Shauna Hay, planned the event. “In the past, however, we’ve confined ourselves to folks in our geographical area who might attend physically. This was a chance to take full advantage of our resources and reach out to our entire alumni and student communities.”

The objective, Frellick added, was “to create a fun activity analogous to the kind of work students do every day in PHLP courses.” Participants were asked to work in groups and assemble two lists of 5 words each, one describing the professional characteristics of a public health leader and another the personal characteristics of a public health leader. These words were tallied by Frellick and run through the Tagxedo software, which produces “word clouds”—visual representations of texts with words sized in accordance with the frequency of their appearance.

Participants had been asked to supply words prior to the gathering, and so they were able to compare a representation of that pre-event tally with one done in the course of event. The four word clouds are reproduced below.
Professional words sent in before the event:

Professional words from the event:
Personal words sent in prior to the gathering:

And personal words that were collected at the event.

(Note that all the words are of equal font size—there were no duplicate words submitted by any of the teams.)
While some difficulties were discovered in connecting all students with both video and audio, the event served as a learning experience for all involved, and a prototype for future events. Participants discussed ideas for similar gatherings, and students and alumni who expressed interest but were unable to join in this time were surveyed as to their interests and availability. It is hoped that the PHLP, with the continued support from the School’s Alumni Association, will be able to schedule such events quarterly.