

*Nation's first distance
education DrPH
keeps leaders at work
while earning doctorate*

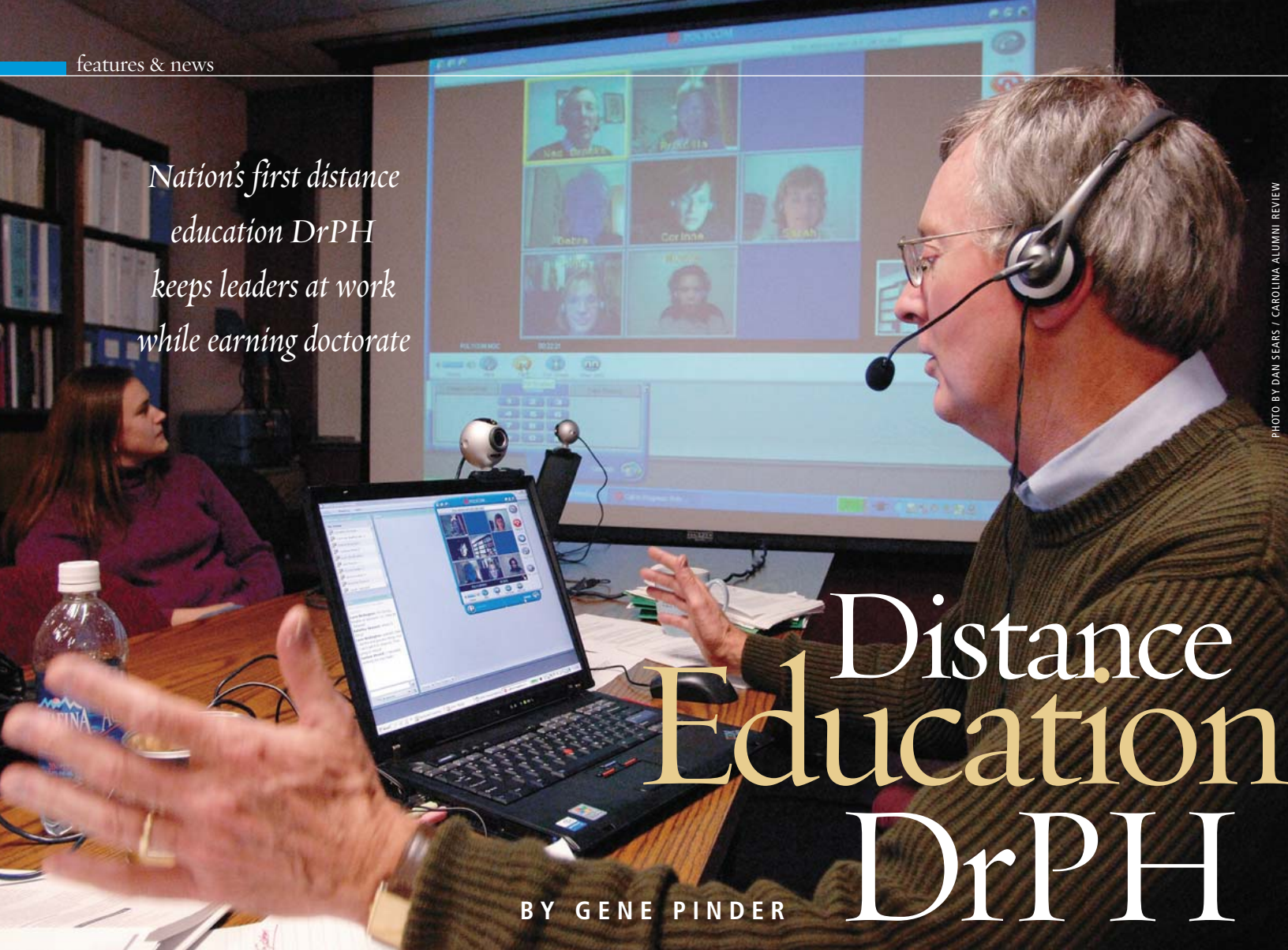


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Distance Education DrPH

BY GENE PINDER

A year ago, Joe Ichter faced a perplexing problem. The assistant director for the Center for Community Partnerships in Albuquerque, New Mexico was doing important work with one of the largest indigent populations in the U.S.

In addition, he was teaching residents at the University of New Mexico's medical school how to develop personal business plans and evaluate medical practices. He also loved living in the Southwest.

To help change and improve state health policies at a higher level – to help more people – he needed a doctorate. To get it, though, he would have to leave the job and community he really enjoyed and work that makes a difference to the public's health.

Corinne Graffunder had a similar problem. The branch chief in the division of violence and prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also wanted to

go back and get her doctorate. But she also had elementary school-age children, and if she pursued her degree it would mean having to move the whole family

"I knew I had to do it while the kids were either in elementary school or had graduated high school," said Graffunder. "I didn't want to have to move while the kids were in middle or high school."

What solutions were available to them? Not many. Doctoral programs in public health almost always require a year in residence. If you were lucky enough to live in a location where a program was within commuting distance, you might be able to combine both

work and study. But those situations are rare, and often result in excessive travel time for students.

Enter the Carolina School of Public Health's Department of Health Policy and Administration and some important technological changes.

The department has had a long history of offering a resident DrPH (Doctor of Public Health) program, but began planning to address the needs of public health leaders who cared. Advances in distance learning technology (including real-time, two-way video conferencing and document sharing), paved the way for the only program of its kind in the



PHOTO: (left to right) Dr. Ned Brooks, DrPH program director; DrPH students: Nicole Bates, Priscilla Flynn, Joseph Ichter, Lynn Redington, Debra Bingham, Michael Stobbe, Corinne Graffunder, Justine Strand and Sarah Verbiest, and DrPH program associate director, Suzanne Havala Hobbs. (left) Dr. Ned Brooks teaches a DrPH class via real-time, two-way video conferencing. Students participate in class via a Hollywood Squares-type video format in which all nine students can see each other on their screens simultaneously.

country. UNC-Chapel Hill is the only university currently offering a doctorate in health leadership almost entirely by distance learning.

And it's meeting a huge need.

"The demand for such a program is just staggering," said Dr. Edward (Ned) Brooks, director of the program. "There's always been a tremendous need to identify and train top leaders in public health. We just haven't been able to provide enough of them with that training because of these very real and personal roadblocks most people face. We think we are literally bursting open the doors of opportunity for these leaders and other universities will soon follow, at least that's our goal."

Indicative of just how much demand there is for the program, the inaugural cohort (class membership) received 89 applications for just nine positions. Another 100 applications were received before Thanksgiving for the program's second year, even though the deadline for application was January. Dr. Suzanne Havala Hobbs, the associate director of the program and a clinical assistant professor in the department, said that she is struck by the diversity of applicants. Not only do the applicants differ in their professional background and geographic region, but the DrPH is receiving strong interest from minority candidates, especially African-Americans and Latin-Americans.

"We're excited and impressed by the students who've elected to join our program," she said. "They're a great group."

The students agree.

"Our cohort is totally amazing," said Justine Strand, one of the first nine students selected for the program. "It's not competitive at all.

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Everybody has a great attitude and it's fantastic combining all of these different disciplines together."

"Interacting with the other students has really broadened my perspective," said Debra Bingham, the director of patient care services for maternal and child health at two large hospitals in New York City and a nurse by training. "I know I'm enriched by their

backgrounds and I think they're enriched by mine."

The group also consists of a healthcare writer based in Atlanta, a senior legislative associate for the Global Health Council in Washington D.C., a marketing and strategic consultant to emerging biotechnology and pharmaceutical firms, the executive director of a university-based center for maternal and infant health, the chief of a physician assistant program at Duke University Medical Center, the coordinator of women's health at the Mayo Clinic, and also Ichter and Graffunder.

For every one of them, the opportunity to continue their education and still contribute to their current organization meant even bigger opportunities to serve others.

"I definitely want to be at the table helping shape policy," said Nicole Bates, a former CDC staff member. "This program has given me more energy and excitement and I've re-dedicated my commitment to public health. It's not an overstatement when I say this program is just phenomenal."

"It builds confidence in being able to know you can add to the discussion at the table," added Bingham.

Part of the excitement comes in the form of a Hollywood Squares-type video format in which all nine students can see each other on their screens at the same time, including each others' cats, dogs and even children. Funding for the technical support is being provided by The Constella Group, a global provider of outsourced health intelligence and technology services.

"I like the fact that it's video based," said Lynn Redington, a consultant in California. "I've taken 22 or 23 classes online over the years, but most are text-based."

The format has required a learning curve of its own. Students say they had to learn how not to talk on top of one another—to raise their hand when they wanted to speak. But all of them agree the program is something very special.

"This program really speaks to the University's vision and innovative spirit," said Bingham. "I'm thrilled to be part of the inaugural group."

The students aren't alone.

"This is probably the most satisfying thing I've done professionally in a long, long time," said Brooks. ■