

CREATING BRIGHTER FUTURES

Michelle Marrone
(From *Rivier Today*, Fall 2017)

Karyn Heavner, Ph.D., Assistant Professor and
Director of Public Health Programs



Photo by Jodie Andruskevich

It can be difficult to remain positive when your specialty is infectious diseases; yet, **Dr. Karyn Heavner** greets each day and student with a smile.

She joined Rivier in 2016 when the University introduced its undergraduate and graduate degrees in public health. “I had been working as a consultant and missed academia,” says Dr. Heavner. “I was looking for a small university. When I visited the campus, I was attracted to the peaceful and welcoming atmosphere.”

Her doctoral and post-doctoral work focused on research projects related to epidemiology methods, autism spectrum disorders, HIV/AIDS, blood cancer, and substance use disorder. Dr. Heavner’s efforts involved survey and simulation research to evaluate and publish project results.

Public health is often a new subject for college students. Explaining the roles of public health professionals and connecting coursework to improved health for communities and select populations is best managed through real-world examples.

“I like to incorporate current events into my classes,” shares Dr. Heavner. “It is fulfilling to watch the progression during the semester as students start to appreciate the effects that diverse events, from hurricanes Irma and Maria on St. Thomas and Puerto Rico, respectively, to changes in New Hampshire state law, have on public health.”

In addition, Dr. Heavner involves her students in community projects throughout the year. Their work provides them with experience in the grassroots, on-the-ground aspects of public health, as well as data collection and evaluation. This year, PH101 students received substance use disorder training on campus as part of Public Health Week.

“It is important for all our students to be knowledgeable about the burden of substance use disorder in southern New Hampshire. Many of our students do, or will work for, or volunteer with community organizations that serve people with this disorder,” says Dr. Heavner. “Nasal naloxone can be administered by non-medical personnel. Offering training on campus is one way that we can provide our students with tools to improve community health.”

Public health professionals from the Nashua Department of Health and Community Services also educated students about the correct terminology to use when discussing people with substance use disorder. “Our students must leave Rivier prepared to discuss controversial public health issues using the proper language and cultural sensitivity,” says Dr. Heavner. These skills enable students to perform at an advanced level and engage more fully with the populations they serve.

Invested in the community, Dr. Heavner maintains close contacts with several state and non-profit partner organizations and is called upon for assistance with local public health initiatives. She and her students recently participated in Nashua’s *Meals for Kids* program. Engagement with these partners provides another level of experiential learning for Rivier students.

Prior to joining the University, Dr. Heavner was employed by the New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute. Her work there included participation in Centers for Disease Control and Prevention grant projects, which evaluated New York State’s name-based HIV reporting legislation, the Expanded Syringe Access Demonstration Program, and the Hepatitis Service Models for Injection Drug Users Project.

Fast forward to June 2017, and syringe exchange is legalized in New Hampshire — an important step toward addressing several community health issues. Given her expertise and experience, Dr. Heavner’s participation in a local coalition has been instrumental in establishing Nashua’s first syringe exchange program. “This is needed in Nashua, and throughout New Hampshire, to reduce the burden of HIV and viral hepatitis,” shares Dr. Heavner. The Southern New Hampshire HIV/AIDS Task Force has taken a leadership role in this project, and I look forward to working with them and other community partners.”

In just one year, Dr. Heavner has helped launch two degree programs at the University, become a vital community resource, involved students in career-building projects, and made meaningful contributions to state and local public health initiatives. Her efforts have a ripple effect within the Rivier and Greater Nashua communities, creating brighter futures for those influenced by her work.

According to St. Francis, “... it is in giving that we receive,” and Dr. Heavner agrees. “The relationships that I have formed with colleagues, local public health professionals, and students have made my first year at Rivier remarkable. I especially enjoy watching the Capstone classes as they progress through their final projects and go on to share their knowledge and gifts with the world.” ■

Bio: Karyn Heavner

Ph.D., Infectious Disease Epidemiology, University at Albany
MSPH, Epidemiology, University of South Carolina
B.A., International Communications, American University of Paris

Assistant Professor of Public Health

- Director of Public Health Programs
- Public Health Advisor

Specialties/Research Interests

- Infectious disease epidemiology
- Epidemiology methods
- HIV/AIDS
- Viral hepatitis
- Substance use
- Health disparities

Courses Taught

- PH101 - Introduction to Public Health
- PH201 - Epidemiology in Public Health
- PH203 - Public Health Seminar
- PH225 - Introduction to Quantitative Public Health Data Management
- PH330 - Public Health Research
- PH400 - Global Health & Health Disparities
- PH495 - Public Health Internship/Capstone
- PH550 - Global Health
- PH575 - Public Health Practicum & Seminar

Publications

Dr. Heavner has published studies in several journals including the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, and the *American Journal of Public Health*. For a complete listing of her publications, visit www.rivier.edu/heavner.

Making a difference in our community

Dr. Heavner's public health students intern at a variety of local organizations, including:

- Nashua Department of Health and Community Services
- St. Joseph Hospital
- Southern New Hampshire Medical Center
- Greater Nashua Mental Health Center
- The Water Project
- John Snow, Inc.
- Nashua Senior Center
- Nashua Police Athletic League
- New Hampshire Public Health Laboratories
- The International Institute of New England
- Serenity Place, and many other organizations

“We try to find projects that match each student's interests and career goals,” notes Dr. Heavner. “Some of the topics that our students have worked on in the past year include substance use disorder services, infection prevention, nutrition and physical activity among children, environmental health, hygiene and sanitation, perinatal health, grant writing, and refugee health and resettlement services.”