For 10 weeks during the summer of 2015, the PRC hosted four delightful, enthusiastic, and dedicated student interns: Courtney Thornton, Hannah Torres, Abigail Velasquez, and Quirin (“Q”) Martine. The students came to us by way of two different programs partnering with the PRC.

Courtney, Hannah, and Abby were participants in UNM’s Undergraduate Pipeline Network (UPN) summer research experience. The purpose of the UPN program is to provide training in basic research skills. With mentoring by a faculty member and help from other research staff, UPN students conduct independent research and present their results at a poster session to which the entire university community is invited.

Q is participating in the Continuing Umbrella of Research Experience (CURE), a 2-year program for American Indian students supported by partnerships between UNM and several high schools and colleges. CURE students attend seminars and lectures at UNM and conduct a research project in community, public, or environmental health under the mentorship of a UNM faculty member. At the end of the program, the students share what they have learned with their school and community in a “creative way”—for example, in a poster, painting, story, poem, song, or dance.

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During their last week at the PRC, the four students generously took a break from their busy schedules to talk about their experience at the PRC and their plans for the future.

**Courtney Thornton**

Courtney Thornton, whose home is in Santa Clarita, California, came to UNM after a UNM recruiter visited her high school and the university offered her a generous scholarship. Asked what she thinks of New Mexico, Courtney said, “it’s growing on me—it has charm.” Courtney is sharing her time in the Land of Enchantment with Murphy, her guinea pig.

Courtney applied to the UPN program because she liked a previous summer research experience she had at a diabetes center in Denver. At the PRC, Courtney studied factors influencing drinking water consumption in Cuba, NM, a rural community that is the focus of much of the PRC’s research. Courtney chose this project because “water is so basic to nutrition.” Her most interesting research discovery was what “a big deal” increasing water consumption is in a place like Cuba because of the need to address so many issues, including taste, affordability, the local culture, and recycling bottles.

The best things about Courtney’s PRC experience were “I learned so much, much more than I did last summer [in Denver]” and “I met a lot of people who are passionate about what they do.” Was there any downside? Said Courtney, “I would have liked to have gone to more meetings about the various PRC projects—to learn more about them and get more involved.”

After she graduates from UNM in 2016, Courtney intends to pursue a master’s degree in public health nutrition. She noted that being at the PRC “reinforced my interest in doing more research on nutrition” and that public health nutrition appeals to her because it provides an opportunity to be involved with “policies that affect a lot of people.”

**Hannah Torres**

Hannah has lived in both Chicago and New Mexico, but she prefers it here because of the much warmer weather. New Mexico also feels like home because of her grandparents: they own the popular Luna Mansion and Teofilo’s restaurants in Los Lunas.

Hannah applied to the UPN program because she thought she needed some background in research to support her future application to medical school. Her time at the PRC “totally changed” her view of research, which she had previously pictured as primarily involving labs and rats. She was impressed by the “variety of projects at the PRC” and the fact that they are “constantly moving forward” and being “applied right away.” Hannah especially appreciated the exposure to subjects that have long intrigued her but that she hasn’t had time to study, especially population science, epidemiology, and anthropology: “Julia’s [Hess] work with refugees is so interesting.”

At the PRC, Hannah analyzed results from a database of pedestrian counts done at several locations in Cuba for the past 5 years. She choose this project because she is “passionate about fitness” and understands the importance for “health outcomes of getting people to be more active.” All the PRC UPN interns spent several days in Cuba doing field work. For Hannah, visiting Cuba was “a life changer” because she was unaware of the lack of resources in rural areas.

As a direct result of her PRC experience, Hannah is thinking of applying to UNM’s MD/PhD program so that she can take courses in subjects she was introduced to during the summer. Was there anything about the UPN program that Hannah didn’t like? “I wish we had more exposure to Cuba, more time in the field, and could participate in the focus groups and surveys that are planned,” she said, and added (laughing), “working 8 to 5; I never did that before.”

*Continued on page 3*
Abby Velasquez

Unlike Hannah, Abby is a small-town gal. She hails from Anton Chico, NM (population about 200), although she went to high school in Roswell, where she was elected “Miss Roswell Outstanding Teen” in 2013. Regardless of where she is, Abby demonstrates her love for Latin dance. “If the music’s on,” she said, “I’ll be dancing.”

Abby became interested in the UPN program because she had no experience with research but wanted to try it. She described her internship at the PRC as “beyond expectations” and “amazing.” Her project focused on use of the tobacco-cessation helpline (QUIT NOW) in rural New Mexico. Abby selected this project because she has long been active in the anti-tobacco movement: in middle school, she was “an advocate against big tobacco” and even promoted her cause in the NM State Legislature. Abby thinks that the most interesting part of her project was working with Andrea Cantarero to extract information from several databases on tobacco use and cessation attempts in rural and urban areas.

According to Abby, the best thing about her experience at the PRC was that “everyone was helpful; they all made time to help if you asked.” She does wish there had been more opportunities for field work and that she could have observed focus groups in action. Overall, the experience has made Abby think about changing her major—to anthropology.

Quirin Martine

Q is part Navajo and, he said, “part four different pueblos.” He attends the Native American Community Academy (NACA), an Albuquerque charter school that currently enrolls students from 29 tribes. Q likes NACA’s focus on community and the fact that teacher-mentors remain with the same students throughout their time at the school. Q applied for the CURE program because he wants to be involved in addressing the problem of chronic diseases in American Indian communities. He has started a dance group at NACA (his favorite dance types are hip-hop and “animation”) because he sees dance as a way to improve health and “ignore things we are faced with.” Q wants to expand the group because he’s observed that the students to whom he has taught dancing have “a new fire within them to learn.”

At the PRC, Q worked with Andrea Cantarero to create profiles of nearly 200 small communities in New Mexico with a high prevalence of risk factors for such health problems as cancer, diabetes, suicide, and tobacco use. Q enjoyed learning to work with databases containing a lot of information, but the best part of his PRC experience was “the support of the staff—Sally, Andrea, Theresa, and Emily.” At the end of the summer, Q presented a poster describing his work to the PRC staff.

Q plans to go to college somewhere outside of New Mexico—“to be somewhere different.” What about career plans? Said Q, “physical therapy, dance, or video-game design.” Meanwhile, he will be in the CURE program for another year and will continue to work at the PRC for a few days a week.

From the Editor

Welcome to The Connection, the newsletter of the UNM Prevention Research Center (PRC). The purpose of The Connection is to broaden communication among the PRC, the PRC’s Community Advisory Council (CAC), and the communities in which CAC members and PRC researchers work. Each issue of The Connection will be emailed to all CAC members, PRC faculty and staff, other community partners, UNM research partners and administrators, the network of 26 PRCs in the United States, funding agencies, elected officials, and others interested in the activities of the CAC and PRC. The Connection will also be posted on the PRC’s website. I am honored to be serving as Editor of The Connection, in consultation with Sally Davis, PhD, Director of the PRC. Sally and I invite and urge all CAC members to consider writing an article about a health promotion/disease prevention project, program, or community activity in which they are involved. Our aim is for The Connection to provide an equal balance of news about PRC activities and those of our CAC.
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UNM Prevention Research Center
Visit us at http://prc.unm.edu

Joint Summit of UNM Centers Concerned with Health Disparities

Renée J. Robillard

The first “joint summit” of the PRC, the New Mexico Center for the Advancement of Research Engagement and Science on Health Disparities (NM CARES) at UNM, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Center for Health Policy at UNM, state officials, and others concerned with the human and financial costs of New Mexico’s high rates of chronic disease, obesity, and other health disparities was held on August 13, 2015, in the Science & Technology Park on UNM’s South Campus. The purpose of the summit was to forge a consortium of the three centers and other partners to address and advance the health status of New Mexicans through prevention, policy, and practice.

The summit was planned by Sally M. Davis, PhD, Director of the PRC; Robert L. Williams, MD, MPH, Director of NM CARES; and Gabe Sanchez, PhD, Executive Director of the RWJF Center. Administrative support for the event was provided by Denise Ruybal, Crystal Krabbenhoft, Leslie Trickey, Felipe Amaral, Antoinette Maestas, Nicole Krawic, and Connie Biemer. Leslie, the PRC’s unit administrator, had a 100% success rate in getting speakers to adhere to the 5-minute limit for their presentations. Felipe, the PRC’s instructional media specialist, ably handled the projector, microphones, and audio recording. Linda, a science research administrator at the PRC, provided photography services.

For a complete list of summit speakers and their topics, please email Leslie Trickey at LETrickey@salud.unm.edu.

During lunch, the summit welcomed Retta Ward, MPH, Cabinet Secretary, NM Department of Health (NMDOH). Secretary Ward spoke about the NM State Health Improvement Plan, which was published in May 2104 and outlines strategies for addressing 10 priority health issues in the state. She also discussed the NM Health System Innovation model, which is being developed by NMDOH and the NM Human Services Department with funding from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The model will use a triple-aim approach: enhancing patients’ experience of care, reducing health care costs, and improving population health. Model design is proceeding with input from hundreds of collaborators, including community and tribal partners, who are serving on committees and work groups.

Summit attendees and speakers represented an exceptionally broad spectrum of disciplines: prevention, family and community medicine, economics, health policy, environmental health, political science, psychology, sociology, health education, pharmacy, oncology, nutrition, epidemiology, and more. In addition, many of the speakers were graduate or medical students, indicating that the passion for addressing health disparities has already been passed down to the next generation of researchers.
Report from the Field: Survey Time in Cuba Again this Year!

Emily A. Lilo

The last week in August and first week in September are always survey time for the PRC’s core project, Village Interventions and Venues for Action (VIVA), in Cuba, NM. The weather was excellent this year; the sun shined every day but one, when we had a few sprinkles but no big storm.

Residents of Cuba know by now that if they see us sitting in front of various locations around town—the Public Health Office, Village of Cuba Office, Mickey’s Save-Way, or Family Dollar—we want their input. This year, Alejandro Ortega and I spent 6 days interviewing folks, collecting their opinions about healthy lifestyles. The survey is offered only to those who live or work in Cuba or within 5 miles of the village, so we always have many disappointed people who want to give us their opinions but are ineligible because they are from much farther afield. In fact, because Mickey’s is the only full-service grocery store carrying fresh produce between Farmington and Bernalillo, some people travel up to 60 miles to shop in Cuba.

This year’s survey was a little different from those done previously because of the progression from the original VIVA-Step Into Cuba project to VIVA II in the PRC’s new funding cycle. The initial project focused primarily on increasing venues for physical activity. Although VIVA II continues to address physical activity, we are expanding our efforts to encourage drinking more water and fewer sweet drinks and to use the New Mexico Department of Health’s QUIT NOW program for tobacco cessation. We thus have a new set of questions that ask about what people normally drink and a new giant drink display that attracted a lot of attention from passers-by. We also added questions to find out whether people are aware of QUIT NOW and the services it provides.

People who take our survey get a free VIVA-Step Into Cuba cap, T-shirt, tote bag, or fan. This year, adults of all ages (18 to 75 years of age and older) participated. Many people stayed around to chat, particularly the senior citizens, who enjoyed telling us stories about the old days in Cuba.

Thanks for sharing with us, until next year. . .

Photo credits: Alejandro Ortega

Emily Lilo, PRC Associate Scientist (left), surveys a resident of Cuba, NM

General survey display of sample drink sizes and gifts
Renée J. Robillard and Linda Peñaloza

This fall, as in the fall of every odd-numbered year since 2003, the New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (YRRS) is being conducted by a team at the PRC in partnership with the NM Department of Health (NMDOH) and the NM Public Education Department. The YRRS assesses the health risk behaviors and resiliency (protective) factors of high school and middle school students in the state. It is part of the national Centers for Disease Control Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, but its results have widespread benefits for New Mexico at the state, county, and school-district levels. According to Linda Peñaloza, PhD, who heads PRC’s YRRS team, the survey provides the only comprehensive surveillance and epidemiology data on health behaviors of NM high school and middle school students. Data from the YRRS are used by thousands of organizations to plan—and obtain funding for—public health work involving NM youth.

The YRRS questionnaire, which students complete voluntarily, anonymously, and with parental consent, includes up to about 100 questions on alcohol and drug use, unintentional injury, violence, suicidal ideation and attempts, tobacco use, sexual activity, physical activity, and nutrition; resiliency factors such as relationships in the family, school, community, and with peers; and health status issues such as body weight and asthma. Most of the questions remain the same from year to year, but a few are added, and others are removed, each time the YRRS is given. This year, the survey contains new questions on use of e-cigarettes and flavored tobacco, hours of sleep, and helpful friends.

Students complete the survey in a single class period, often taking about 20 to 45 minutes. Volunteer in-school survey coordinators and the students’ teachers receive gift certificates to thank them for their help. The YRRS is offered to all 89 NM school districts. This year, 80 accepted, and the survey will be conducted in 68 middle schools and 149 high schools. An average of 150 to 200 students in each school complete the survey—a total of more than 9,000 middle school and 22,000 high school students. Conducting the YRRS is a huge undertaking that includes obtaining permission to administer the survey from school superintendents, scheduling the survey day, preparing the survey materials, getting the materials to the schools on time and the completed surveys back to the PRC, cleaning up the answer sheets for scanning, meeting with the YRRS steering committee, and more. Fortunately, the PRC YRRS team—Linda Peñaloza, Eric Chrisp, Courtney FitzGerald, Erinn Flynn, Laura Gutman, Danielle Mascareñas, Marlene Muñoz, Karen Lopez, and Leslie Trickey—is energetic and dedicated.

After all the pencils have been put away, data analysis begins. PRC and NMDOH staff work together to process the enormous amount of information gathered and to report it to the school districts and others as soon as possible. The monthly YRRS newsletter, YRRS Connections, which is produced at the PRC by Linda Peñaloza, Courtney FitzGerald, and Laura Gutman, is one way in which the data are distributed. The newsletter covers one topic each month. YRRS Connections and the YRRS findings from 2003 to 2013 are available at www.youthrisk.org.

The PRC YRRS team has also been involved in a pilot program called the Risk/Resiliency Assessment Project for Students (RAPS). RAPS engages students in using and understanding YRRS health data to improve their own health and that of their community. The project included a photography component in NM high schools. Students who participated took the beautiful, evocative, thoughtful photographs that graced the walls of the PRC office all summer.
PRC Helps Develop New 5-Year Strategic Plan to Prevent Sexual Violence in New Mexico

Leona Woelk and Theresa Cruz

For the past year, Theresa Cruz, PhD; Leona Woelk, MA; Julia Hess, PhD; and Samantha Bear of the PRC worked with the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) and the New Mexico Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (NMCSAP) to develop a strategic plan to prevent sexual violence in New Mexico. The PRC used a three-tiered process to gather input into the plan.

Tier one consisted of an advisory group that included staff from the PRC, NMDOH, NMCSAP, rape crisis centers, and other state and local agencies working to prevent and respond to sexual violence. The group reviewed national and state sexual assault data; identified groups most at risk of sexual violence; assisted in developing the strategic plan’s vision, mission, goals, and objectives; and reviewed and provided feedback on drafts of the plan.

The second tier was made up of individuals able to provide expert advice on specific sections of the strategic plan, including those focusing on sexual violence prevention in priority populations in New Mexico. The priority populations identified by the advisory group are children, women, college students, African Americans, American Indians, people with disabilities, people residing in rural communities, immigrants and refugees, older adults, and people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ).

The third tier comprised focus groups, conducted by PRC researchers, with participants from local rape crisis centers, organizations partnering with the centers, and the community. Eleven focus groups were held, including a pilot session with the advisory group. Six focus groups were location-based to ensure that feedback was obtained from both rural and urban communities and communities representative of NM’s ethnic and cultural make-up. The other four groups convened members of specific populations. One consisted only of men (neither victims nor offenders) so that a better understanding of how to engage young men in sexual violence prevention efforts could be achieved. Three groups were made up, respectively, of LGBTQ participants and service providers, people from several American Indian tribes, and Spanish-speaking immigrants.

The themes that emerged from the focus-group discussions, along with the advice from the tier-two subject matter experts, provided advisory group members with a framework from which they developed the strategic plan. The vision of the plan: “Safe communities that are free from sexual violence.” The mission: “To prevent sexual violence through education, communication, collaboration, and community action.”

The broad goals of the strategic plan are to change community norms regarding the acceptability of sexual violence, to create safer environments through changes to policies and infrastructure, and to enhance the public health approach to prevention efforts. Achieving these goals will require emphasizing healthy relationships, gender equity, cultural strengths, and respect for others. The PRC will continue to work with the NMDOH, NMCSAP, and our community partners to implement the plan, which will be available on the PRC website once it has been finalized.
The University of New Mexico Prevention Research Center (UNM PRC) is one of 26 PRCs funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The mission of the UNM PRC is to address the health promotion and disease prevention needs of New Mexican communities through community- and evidence-based research. The PRC fulfills this mission through collaboration, training, dissemination, implementation, and evaluation activities.

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