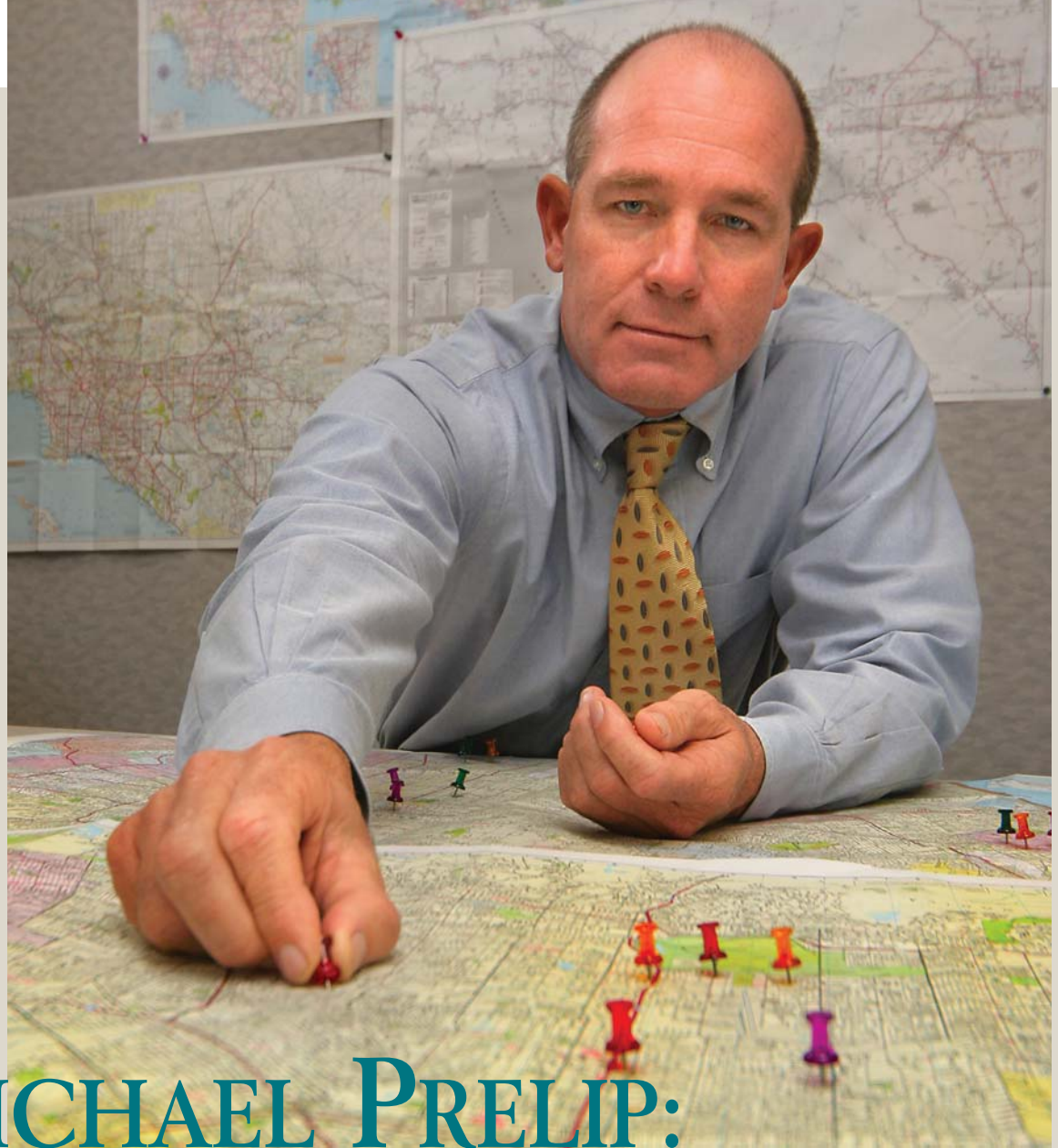


IN RUNNING HIS DEPARTMENT'S FIELD STUDIES PROGRAM, HE GUIDES STUDENTS THROUGH THE PROCESS OF OBTAINING REAL-WORLD PUBLIC HEALTH EXPERIENCES. BUT FOR THIS FACULTY MEMBER, MENTORSHIP MEANS MUCH MORE.



MICHAEL PRELIP: Helping Students to Find Their Way

From his first post-college work experiences as a grammar- and middle school teacher, Dr. Michael Prelip was drawn to the role of mentor. It was a role he would frequently revisit as he embarked on a career as a public health professional after earning his M.P.H. from the school in 1985.

“In most of my jobs, there were lots of people without formal training,” Prelip explains. “These individuals had incredible experiences and passion toward the work, but they lacked specific technical skills that would enable them to reach their full potential. Wherever I was, I often found myself in the role of teaching, mentoring and guiding.” While continuing to work in public health for more than a decade, mostly in the field of health promotion, Prelip also began to teach part-time at community colleges. Every chance he got, he served as a preceptor for M.P.H. students doing their fieldwork. “I really enjoyed that experience,” he says.

So much so that in 1996, Prelip jumped at the opportunity to join the faculty at the UCLA School of Public Health. He is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Community Health Sciences and runs the department’s Field Studies Program, which, as part of the degree requirement, gives students the opportunity to apply the skills and knowledge they learn in the classroom in a community-based or health-related organization (see related article on page 8). Prelip helps to place and supervise approximately 65 students each year throughout Southern California and, in some cases, beyond.

Prelip brings his experience as a public health professional to the classroom, teaching applied courses focusing on developing and evaluating programs for community-level interventions. He is involved in several research projects focusing on promotion of physical activity, nutrition, and other healthy behaviors, including

“Nutrition-Friendly Schools and Communities,” a pilot study in which Prelip and faculty colleagues Drs. Charlotte Neumann and Wendelin Slusser are evaluating the impact of nutrition education programs and activities at eight elementary schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District. He is also the faculty advisor for the student-run UCLA Mobile Clinic/Greater West Hollywood Food Coalition.

But it is Prelip’s role as a mentor that has had a lasting effect on so many of the school’s students, as well as new public health professionals outside of the school’s traditional M.P.H. program. He has taken an active role in the school’s M.P.H. for Health Professionals Program, which is designed for working professionals seeking to attain leadership positions in public health while maintaining a full-time career. Prelip is also principal investigator for the Pacific Public Health Training Center, a federally funded effort to develop and support effective public health training opportunities through a consortium that includes California’s four schools of public health – led by UCLA – and the University of Hawaii.

Whether he’s mentoring students or new professionals, Prelip says, his focus is on not only honing skills and fostering appropriate work experiences, but also on helping develop a better sense of their professional self. “Mike has provided an incredible amount of support and guidance for me, both professionally and personally,” says Stephanie Vecchiarelli (M.P.H. ’01, Ed.D.), who has worked with Prelip for six years, beginning when she was a student and continuing as a colleague on Prelip’s school-based nutrition research projects. “He is usually one of the first people I turn to when I’m seeking advice.” In helping her to prepare for her M.P.H. practicum with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Division of Adolescent and School Health in Atlanta, Prelip pushed Vecchiarelli to develop a work plan that turned out to be instrumental in making the experience more meaningful, she says.

Prelip traces his own interest in public health to 1976, when, as an undergraduate at UC San Diego, he volunteered as a night-time receptionist at the Laguna Beach Free Clinic. “The dedication of the volunteer doctors and nurses was just overwhelming to me,” he says. After graduating with his M.P.H., Prelip served in a wide variety of health promotion roles for many different organizations, including a community-based pregnant and parenting teen program, an immigrant health program, HIV and STD prevention programs, the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, and many more.

In the nine years he has headed his department’s field studies program, Prelip has overseen a broadening in the scope of experiences that students

pursue. “It’s a reflection of changes in public health practice in general, with students focusing not only on government entities – which are still very important – but also on community health and social service nonprofit agencies,” he explains. Prelip has also attempted over the years to give the program more structure and closer faculty supervision in planning and guiding the experience.

Most of the school’s M.P.H. students fulfill their 400-hour field requirement through work experience in the summer after their first year. Each winter, Prelip holds orientation sessions to acquaint students with their options, and later meets individually with students on more than one occasion, offering guidance as they contemplate their choices. Once students have lined up their practicum position, Prelip works with them in developing a detailed scope-of-work plan. As they go through their internship, students are required to submit weekly logs, which Prelip reviews and returns with comments; once the students have completed the experience, they write a final report that Prelip grades. Prelip makes site visits and maintains contact with each preceptor, getting feedback on their students. Having worked in public health in Los Angeles for more than 20 years, Prelip has an extensive network of contacts that he can draw from to assist students in finding the right fit, although he notes that many arrive with unique interests and create their own preceptor relationships.

Prelip believes students’ practicum experiences are a critical piece in their overall education. “We have faculty who are extremely accomplished, but most of them are focused on specific topics, and not all of them have worked in practice settings,” he says. “There has been a struggle between the academic world and the practice world in public health: In general, each of the worlds thinks the other doesn’t quite get it. Health professionals with M.P.H. degrees have an important role to play in bringing these worlds together.”

The students he supervises range from established professionals who return to pursue their degree to younger students with little work experience. Even more than the skills they attain, the younger students tend to grow significantly simply from working full-time in a health-related organization, Prelip says. “Often, they come to me with an idea of what they want to do based on their hopes and dreams, and then after the field experience they reexamine their goals,” Prelip explains. “When these students come back and say, ‘Now I’m confused about what I should do with my life,’ my response is, ‘Congratulations, I’m excited for you. You’re *supposed* to be asking those questions at this point.’ ”

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