STUDYING CITY LIFE

Yes, it’s complicated. Start by thinking socially, culturally, politically, economically, geographically, and bio-environmentally. You can’t pursue one line of reasoning without the others. With backgrounds, advanced degrees and full-fledged careers already in public health, nursing, medicine, architecture, education, social work as well as administration, 60 doctoral students are capturing the essence of interdisciplinary education. What’s at stake is the health and everyday life of the 222 million Americans who call a metropolitan area home.

Throughout the 2011-12 fall and spring semesters, Yuri Jadotte, MD, took the CHEN bus traveling a loop of city streets between the University Heights campuses of UMDNJ School of Nursing (SN), New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) and Rutgers-Newark. This PhD student laughs easily about how many miles he logged going from one school to another and how different the cultures are at each stop.

Fellow student Sharese Porter, MPH, CHES, and their professor, Dula Pacquiao, EdD, RN, CTN, sit alongside Yuri at a conference room table and nod in animated agreement. “We are certainly a one-of-a-kind program,” says Dula. (By the way, this is a program in which everyone, from full professors on down to first-year students, is on a first-name basis, a fact that was not only hard for Yuri as a new physician, but that we also found difficult to do as editors who almost always refer to individuals as “Doctor” or by their last name in our copy. In this story, as you see, we bow to the Urban Systems’ style.)

A 4:14 p.m. CHEN bus departing from Rutgers could get Yuri to UMDNJ by 4:26 or to NJIT by 4:37 with one stop on this regular route taking him as far as the train station by 4:46. Classes were all in the evening to accommodate his day-time work schedule and typically, he’d be on that bus between 4 and 5 p.m. and later heading home between 8 and 9 p.m. CHEN stands for Council of Higher Education in Newark, established back in 1971 to encourage collaborations among the four public institutions of higher education in Newark: UMDNJ, NJIT, Rutgers-Newark and Essex County College. This unincorporated association works well and has served as a force in the revitalization of the community bounded by Springfield Avenue/Market Street, Littleton Avenue, Orange Road and Halsey Street.

The CHEN institutions have a combined daytime population of almost 50,000 and close to 35,000 of them are degree-seeking students like Yuri and Sharese, a public health educator who is at the dissertation stage of her PhD journey.
Yuri Jadotte, MD, took the CHEN bus traveling a loop of city streets between the University Heights campuses of UMDNJ-School of Nursing (SN), New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) and Rutgers-Newark. Evidence-Based Practice, Yuri earned his pursue dermatology as well as a research program, the PhD in Urban Systems that draws on the com- pany of local travel last year was his first. In fact, we are very comfortable in our informality and very collegial. Students should feel at ease approaching faculty or arguing a point. This is what I believe a PhD program should be all about and this program is very visionary. It began back in 2001 and we have integrated the three areas and three schools so well now. Even the diploma at graduation is awarded by all three universities. Graduates go on to be employed as faculty, researchers, pro- gram planners, policy developers, and administrators in education, health care, government, and public health agencies. "Everyone, no matter what track you are in, works towards social justice," says Sharese, an educator with Rutgers Cooperative Extension, the community-based outreach and research arm of their School of Environmental and Biological Sciences. "Whether we are designing a building, working on a curriculum or working as health practitioners, we incorporate social dynamics. Health is not just based on an individual's behavior. In fact, one of the features of the program is that we always look at those social reasons for illness and disease as well as the environ- ment and the individual." Sharese, who is in her fourth year, was born and raised in Newark and has always gravitated towards urban environments so, for her, finding this multi-faceted gradu- ate program was "magical." In fact, she says, "Here, this program has really allowed me the flexibility to create my own particular path and interest, but at the same time, without it, I would not be able to work in the city as much. This is something about this, to change the envi- ronment there so that we can't happen in another urban situation." So many people died or were injured in Haiti because of the way urban systems were designed. I want to be in a position if I am ever in any similar situation to be able to say, 'This is what we should do.' "And while dermatology may be his clinical interest, he explains that "any disease, particularly infectious and allergic diseases, fits spatial patterns and can be distributed in certain geographical ways. Few have looked at the socio-economic and geographic aspects of dermatology." Karen Frank, PhD, at NJIT, is the overall director of the Urban Systems program, and she coordinates the environ- ment track. At Rutgers, Alan Sadovnik, PhD, manages the environmental health policy specialization. Karen believes that "urban problems are multifaceted and cannot be understood or solved in an urban and rural context. The environmental health problems in the city are connected to health problems in the countryside." She says that "any disease, particularly infectious and allergic diseases, fits spatial patterns and can be distributed in certain geographical ways. Few have looked at the socio-economic and geographic aspects of dermatology." Dula explains, "It has been a big responsibility to get these three huge uni- versity administrations working together. In medicine and with the growth of all health-related professions, there is always a lot of turf protection." Specialization, in nursing and all the allied health fields, is the norm. Meanwhile, those in the social sciences are way ahead in realizing that collaboration between specialties is keys to success. "You can't study anthropo- logy without sociology, or art without history," says this nurse educator. For her own doctorate in education at Rutgers she majored in anthropology but had to be prepared to teach the students in the specialties she so opted for sociology and history as well. The former director of graduate education at Kean University, Dula was thrilled to come to UMDNJ in 2005 to teach in this PhD program. "I've always been interested in the social determinants of health and it's all coming together now. There is a big push in health care today to look at health and not just disease. While we may be good at helping people after they are sick, we have not been good at preventing disease. We've got to address those behaviors that keep people healthy before they get sick." In nursing, there has been too much emphasis on patients as individuals and not enough on populations. "Let's talk about why some groups are more or less healthy than other groups. Let's talk about class and environmental issues and discrimination. Think about it, your health has so much to do with education, income and access to care. We don't attend conferences, Dula can't help but smile about the Urban Systems PhD. "Everybody is talking about inter-professional collaboration but we've been doing it for years here. It's very exciting." Other faculty who teach in the Urban Systems Program are: Barbara Goldberg, PhD, RN-BC; Tony Forrester, PhD, RN; Daniel Gundersen, PhD, RN; Sharese treasures the interdisciplinary nature of this five-year program and has watched how students interact and teach one another. "Our group is really outspo- "Through the 2001-12 Fall and Spring, Yuri Jadotte, MD, took the CHEN bus traveling a loop of city streets between the University Heights campuses of UMDNJ-School of Nursing (SN), New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) and Rutgers-Newark. A medical resident who intends to pursue dermatology as well as a research associate at the New Jersey Center for Evidence-Based Practice, Yuri earned his MD in 2010 from UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School (NJMS). The reason for all that local travel last year was his first year of core coursework in a unique 72 credit doctoral program, the PhD in Urban Systems that draws on the com- bined strengths of three universities. health at UMDNJ's School of Nursing, environment at NJIT's School of Architecture and education at Rutgers' School of Public Affairs and Adminis-