Precollege Programs: An Innovative Way to Introduce Nursing to College-Bound Students

The precollege summer program at the authors’ university is an opportunity for students in grades 11 and 12 to experience college living for 2 weeks. Each student enrolls in one college-level course, which meets daily for 3 hours, and participates in social activities and other programming to support their understanding of college life. Most stay overnight in campus dormitories. The authors’ school of nursing took advantage of this chance to expose high-achieving, college-bound pupils to the diversity of the nursing field by offering three courses in the program: Advances in Cardiovascular Medicine and Technology, Forensics: Violence and Crime in U.S. Public Health, and Global Health Leadership in the 21st Century. From the start, the authors recognized the importance of holding these classes in their building, which allowed them to showcase the knowledge, experience, and facilities that a school of nursing can offer.

For the global health course, the class was composed of 10 girls and four boys of various ethnicities, including one international student. Eleven of the students were rising 12th graders, and the other three were entering 11th grade. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory guided the development of this course; global health was taught as hierarchical and in interacting systems at the individual, community, national, and international levels. Learning activities ranged from lectures and panel discussions by faculty and expert guests, readings from Reimagining Global Health (Farmer, Kim, Kleinman, & Basilio, 2013) and other texts, weekly written reflections and current events reports by students, and field trips with on-site briefings and hands-on activities.

Field Trips and Site Visits

Experiential learning is a cornerstone of nursing education. In this course, the authors spent 3 days on field trips with hands-on participation, guided by a socioecological perspective on health in the United States and abroad. Two of these trips are highlighted below. Variations of them could be used in many different nursing or prenursing courses, specifically because of the potential for experiential learning about social determinants of health to produce more insightful and empathetic nurses (Townsend, Gray, & Forber, 2016).

One field trip was to a town near the university that is home to refugees resettled from over 50 countries. The authors wanted students to experience the challenges of using a supplemental food program and navigating a flawed public transportation system. To do this, they set up a simulation of using the federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children at a local grocery store. The students had to plan how to get there from the university by bus, which required waiting for a transfer on the side of a busy road with no sidewalk amidst broken glass and discarded condoms. Many of these students had never taken a city bus before and found the experience to be eye opening. In the store, the students paired up and recorded what foods they would buy for the week with their Women, Infants, and Children vouchers based on their assigned family configuration. Afterward, they reflected on their experiences in a group discussion at a nearby site.

Another field trip was to the global health section of a local museum, where students worked through interactive touch-screen simulations about neglected tropical diseases, such as dracunculiasis and blinding trachoma. This involved selecting appropriate clinical, behavioral, and environmental interventions. The exhibit was supplemented by distributing symptom clue cards (developed by the museum) to the students, who then had to work in groups to deduce which tropical disease most likely caused the symptoms on their cards. Three chaperones were there with the students throughout these activities to guide them through the experiences and ensure their safety.

Reactions and Results

Student responses to this course were overall very positive and suggested gains in empathy and insight. As one student wrote in a reflection paper, “There is no better transfer of information than by… first hand…. I had never previously been in a situation in which I had to be very selective at the market or have to wait nearly an hour to catch a bus, and the experience will surely stay with me longer than anything on a computer screen or piece of paper could have.” Another student wrote, “These [2] weeks have changed me greatly in small ways…. I live in a bubble, but I feel that my bubble has expanded colossally with the knowledge I now have.” These student quotes demonstrate the power of experiential learning to enhance empathy and promote understanding of socioecological systems.

Lessons Learned

Precollege programs have traditionally focused on high school students going into law, business, or medicine. This experience showed that a school of nursing is also well placed to offer precollege courses for a diverse high school population. The authors hope one day to welcome many of these students to the nursing profession.

References


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The authors have disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise.

doi:10.3928/01484834-20170421-13