

CLINICAL PRACTICE

The Community Champions Program at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing

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ABSTRACT

The Community Champions program at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing provides motivated nursing students with opportunities to partner with the greater Philadelphia community and engage in hands-on learning. With several thriving initiatives, students participate in service learning outside of the classroom, which ultimately strengthens their nursing and leadership skills. Students work to improve health and health education for people of all ages. These experiences help nursing students better understand the social determinants of health and how they impact community members. Dedicated faculty members assist in guiding the students, who work collaboratively to exchange ideas and methods. This program not only has an effect on the community, but also has a profound impact on the students that participate.

Key Words: Partnerships, Community engagement, Service learning, Community-based learning, Community champions

1. INTRODUCTION

Service learning in undergraduate nursing education is accomplished through community partnerships. This model provides social, civic, and clinical benefits to undergraduate nursing students while providing valuable health services to the community. The service learning model requires the key elements of reciprocity, meaningful service, development of leadership, and reflection.^[1] Research further indicates that service learning is an effective method of engaging undergraduate nursing students in community-based learning.^[2]

Service learning exposes students to the social determinants of health and allows them to challenge preconceived notions about underserved populations.^[3] This process also allows students to gain new cultural perspectives, improve cultural sensitivity, and practice skills of cross-cultural care.^[4] After completing service learning programs, students reported increased personal satisfaction and an improved awareness of

unmet health and social resources within the community.^[3,5] Students participating in service learning also demonstrated greater knowledge of diversity, awareness of political implications, civic engagement, and community self-efficacy and were also more likely to participate in continued service following graduation.^[6]

Service learning also has a positive impact on the professional development of undergraduate nursing students during their clinical experiences. Participating in a service learning course enabled undergraduate nursing students to quickly develop nursing competencies, experience autonomy in their practice, and challenged them to maintain integrity.^[7] Students were able to experience and develop leadership skills within the organizations that they served^[8-10] and service learning improved students' critical thinking skills,^[11] ability to conduct a patient and community needs assessment, and increased awareness of community nursing.^[12,13] These

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programs have been shown to be effective when integrated with maternity nursing, community nursing, statistics and research courses.^[14–16] Service learning has also been shown to be effective in improving inter-professional competencies between nursing and medical students.^[17,18]

Service learning has also been shown to be beneficial to the communities served by the students. The long term establishment of service learning programs within a defined community creates a “Home Base” where service providers and receivers can come together on a regular basis.^[19] Service learning facilitates the establishment of mutual trust between students and community members, improving outcomes^[19] and providing vital services to underserved community members.^[3,15–18] The service learning model of community engagement has a significant effect on the student nurses as well as on the community.

2. THE COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS PROGRAM

In 2014, students at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing established the Community Champions service learning program, aimed at improving the health status of the surrounding urban community and at providing undergraduate nursing students with engagement opportunities beyond their senior year community health course. Surveys revealed that a number of students felt that it was important to apply what they were learning in the classroom to the surrounding community. The Community Champions program is an umbrella organization that encompasses community engagement initiatives and opportunities. The Community Champions program provides nursing students with multiple options for engagement, allowing students to tailor their own service learning experience in a high risk, underserved community. The Philadelphia Department of Public Health conducted a Community Health Assessment in 2014. It showed that West Philadelphia, the geographic area of the University of Pennsylvania, has the poorest health indicators for adult smoking, teen gonorrhea and chlamydia rates, preventable hospitalizations, and food safety. Lower Southwest Philadelphia has the poorest health indicators for adult obesity and hypertension.^[20] This innovative Community Champions model has engaged undergraduate nursing students in effective health-based community engagement to expose students to the issues prevalent in West Philadelphia.

Community Champions is a student-led, faculty-mentored program serving the Philadelphia urban community by addressing the health and educational needs of the population in collaboration with community members and organizations. The student participants, committed to community engagement, devote several hours weekly to a variety of initiatives identified by the community. Community Champions orig-

inated with 20 students and, in a short time, has grown to include more than 50 students. With increased student interest, Community Champions expanded its programing in West Philadelphia.

Members of Community Champions are all students who were recruited to participate in the program. In order to be considered, each student must submit an essay about their interests, motivations, and potential contributions. Students must also describe previous leadership experience and community engagement. Once recruited, students are matched with community initiatives. The leaders of Community Champions place a student in an initiative based on the interests of the student, his or her prior experience, and the needs of the community organization. New students are guided by former student leaders and University faculty and staff who oversee community engagement. Faculty mentors with extensive experience in community engagement are assigned to oversee each initiative. They frequently meet in-person with all of the Community Champions members throughout the semester, and make regular site visits to ensure that each initiative is running smoothly. It is expected that each student member will submit a weekly reflection paragraph to the faculty member overseeing the student’s initiative. The Community Champions leaders hold monthly meetings attended by all members, including staff from the Edward and Barbara Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, a center that focuses on connecting Penn students and faculty with the West Philadelphia community and facilitating students’ contributions to improving quality of life in Philadelphia.

In addition, student leaders also serve as liaisons between the site coordinators and the Community Champions organization. The frequent meetings allow leaders and members to discuss their initiative’s progress, share goals, and brainstorm ideas. These general body meetings proved to be an effective way for the leaders of the organization to review the status of each program and determine what further actions need to be taken to foster the growth of each initiative. The school coordinators attend these meetings as well, namely the Penn Netter Center directors, and this collaboration helps to streamline communication between Community Champions and its partnering schools.

There are several techniques used to incentivize students to participate in Community Champions. In the past, Community Champions leaders received independent study course credit. This structure helped to sustain continued interest because it prompted students who began as general members to want to remain committed so that they would be the chosen leaders of their specific initiatives in the following year. We

have now developed a mechanism for course credit for all students involved. This method has greatly improved our participation and retention rates. Faculty who are involved in the Community Champions program do so as part of the expectation that faculty will be engaged in service.

In an effort to publicize the work that Community Champions is doing, the student directors met with Penn's School of Nursing Communications Department to revamp its existing logo. With guidance from the student leaders, the graphic designer preserved the logo's original blue and red heart-shaped hands encompassing an ECG strip above the organization's motto, "Creating Healthier Communities Together." They also added the words "The University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing" at the bottom of the logo, highlighting the program's connection to the School of Nursing. Working with a design team allowed Community Champions to create an enhanced logo to garner more attention and legitimize the group's presence on campus, which is important when establishing new partnerships and strengthening old ones.

The leaders of Community Champions have been confronted with challenges throughout the development and evolution of the program. The primary barrier is creating schedules that work both for the student participants and the community members. Undoubtedly, the students at the School of Nursing have demanding course loads. However, when partnering with the greater Philadelphia community, it is important that we meet the community participants consistently and on days during the week that are convenient for the students and the community partners. Another challenge that we have faced is obtaining necessary funding. Various faculty have received small intramural and extramural grants to support Community Champions' initiatives, but to insure sustainability, ongoing infrastructure and funding is needed.

3. COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS INITIATIVES

Several of the Community Champions initiatives are enriched by inter-professional engagement and collaboration with other professional schools in the University. The School of Nursing collaborates with the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, the foundation of many of the community initiatives. The Netter Center for Community Partnerships was founded in 1992 and functions to 1) improve the internal coordination and collaboration of all university-wide community service programs, and 2) develop democratic, mutually beneficial, mutually respectful partnerships between the University and the community.^[21] The University engages in three types of activities through the Netter Center, including Academically Based Community Service courses, direct traditional service, and community development.

The faculty and leaders of Community Champions consistently seek to form new innovative programs and create new partnerships with already existing initiatives in the surrounding community. Currently, Community Champions oversees eight initiatives. One such program is the Dance for Health program, an inter-generational initiative to increase activity in the community. It takes place in the recreation center of a local high school and brings the community together for free line dancing classes, led by an enthusiastic and inspirational dance instructor. Penn nursing and medical students mentor local high school students to measure outcomes and together they track the progress of the dancing participants. Through this data collection process, students analyze how the dancing affects heart rate, weight, etc. and ultimately impacts health.^[22] According to current literature, physical activity is helpful in addressing chronic disease prevention and management. Dancing provides the same cardiovascular benefits as do other aerobic activities and thus is considered a type of physical activity that contributes to weight loss and improvement of insulin sensitivity.^[23]

Another Dance for Health program, which takes place at a similar K-8 school in West Philadelphia, aims to increase physical activity among schoolchildren through dance. Physical activity is measured by pedometers, and the nursing students track the number of steps along with heart rate, weight, and height of the elementary students. The weight and height measurements are used to calculate and track Body Mass Index (BMI) of the participating students. The children learn to stay active while having fun in this initiative.

A modified Dance for Health program takes place at the LIFE (Living Independently for Elders) Center, where elderly participants receive medical, health, recreational, and social services. This program was initiated by nursing students in their clinical setting who believed that some form of activity would greatly enhance the quality of life of the population. At the LIFE center, students lead a weekly 45-minute, low intensity chair aerobics class for older adults in the community. All of the dance moves are choreographed to music and can be done while seated. The nursing students collect data and survey responses to evaluate the effect of dance on depression in the geriatric population.

In an effort to increase health education, Community Champions also has several partnerships with schools and community centers, where nursing students serve as mentors and teachers. Through the Library Partnership, started in 2014 as a clinical site for the undergraduate community health course, Penn Nursing students interact with community members of all ages. The students create detailed lesson plans and provide health lessons in the local libraries for children, adults,

and the elderly. The Penn Nursing students organize interactive learning activities and educate the community through exciting presentations and hands-on programs.

At a local elementary school, Penn Nursing students collaborate with medical students in the Diabetes Awareness Program, to spread awareness about diabetes and promote health throughout the West Philadelphia community. Penn Nursing students teach fourth and fifth graders about the causes of, and risk factors for, diabetes. The students gain knowledge about diabetes and learn how to improve their overall health. Some sample topics that have been discussed at the program include counting carbohydrates and the importance of physical activity. Asthma education also takes place at this school. The Asthma Reduction Outreach Team is a continuation of the Academically Based Community Service asthma course. Beyond the traditional lecture-style lessons, students work to engage the learners to inspire advocacy and change in their communities through food, environmental, and physical activity trigger reduction and awareness.

Penn Nursing students visit other local public schools to lead health classes and activities. At one of the schools, a health curriculum was created for first and second graders as a supplement to the formal health classes conducted. Nursing students teach health classes in a fun and creative environment to support and reinforce health knowledge. At the Health Sciences Exploration Program, a team of medical and nursing students created an afterschool program for sixth through eighth grade students at a local middle school to help students explore in depth the science of different health topics (diabetes, nutrition, exercise physiology, acne, hygiene, and asthma) and learn to become mentors and leaders on such topics. At the Fruit Stand clubs, participants work with West Philadelphia students to prepare and sell fruit to their peers and learn about nutrition. These students also acquire important business and marketing skills throughout the process.

4. DISCUSSION

Universities have abundant and invaluable resources at their disposal, including but not limited to: human capital, faculty, students, staff, libraries, researchers, and technology. When partnerships address community needs, these once distant resources become accessible and attainable. As Ira Harkavy, Associate Vice President and founding Director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, stated, “universities cannot afford to remain shores of affluence, self-importance and horticultural beauty at the edge of island seas of squalor, violence, and despair.”^[24] This notion is further emphasized in the current literature. Studies have demonstrated the importance of community engagement and the ways in which it

benefits both community members and those participating in programs within the communities. Students believe that emphasizing the value of community engagement helps foster a culture of service learning on campus whereby students not only participate but also take pride in doing so. By participating in or leading an initiative, a Community Champions member learns civic responsibility and also acquires invaluable nursing skills. The Community Champions program truly enhances the knowledge of the students, faculty, and surrounding communities alike.

In order for Community Champions at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing to grow and expand, leaders and faculty advisors must invest significant time, effort, and resources into the recruitment process at the beginning of each school year. In addition to recruiting new members, it is imperative for the leaders of each initiative to collect data and communicate the outcome results with partnering community organizations. By analyzing and disseminating the data, Community Champions leaders can better understand the impact of the programs and learn how to improve.

Another goal of the program is to target new populations and develop new partnerships. Students are now beginning to work closely with an organization that seeks to improve the wellness and health of the growing West Philadelphia Latino community. Penn Nursing students will be involved in mentoring, tutoring, and teaching within the nonprofit organization’s educational branch. This division believes that the key to improved health outcomes is through education. The organization, together with Community Champions’ involvement, aims to provide high-quality health care, community building, and educational programs (tutoring and mentorships) to the Latino population. Furthermore, the Community Champions program plans to work more closely with the elderly population and begin to partner with pregnant women, creating mutually beneficial partnerships with these communities.

The University of Pennsylvania’s Community Champions program is providing motivated nursing students with invaluable service learning experiences. Students become engaged in initiatives that align with their specific interests and are able to learn in supervised, hands-on environments outside of the classroom. Students become better communicators, leaders, teachers, and advocates by participating in Community Champions. These skills will ultimately make the students better nurses and stronger leaders in the ever-changing and growing field of healthcare.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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