



Dental Hygiene Student Perceptions as a Result of Service Learning Experiences

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Abstract

Background: Dental Hygiene faculty within the University of Michigan School of Dentistry hypothesize that most dental hygiene students are only vaguely aware of oral health disparities in the community, and do not envision how they might become involved in addressing local, regional and national oral health initiatives post graduation. Further, they do not seem to have a concrete vision as to what their social responsibility as a health care provider might be post graduation. **Purpose:** To investigate whether recent course revisions in the senior practicum are changing students' perceptions regarding their career plans as well as their desire and ability to address oral health disparities within the community. **Methods:** Significant course revisions were made to the senior practicum course. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected and analyzed from online discussions and end-of-course evaluations. **Results:** Results indicate that recent course revisions increased students' awareness of the challenges associated with addressing oral health disparities in the community, and also increased their desire to choose a career path that would provide opportunities to help those in need. **Conclusions:** While increased reflection on oral health disparities may increase students' desire to work in a community setting, it may also decrease their confidence in working with such populations due to an increased awareness of the challenges associated with community program planning and implementation.

Methods

Significant course revisions were made in order to develop students' skills in assessing, planning, implementing and evaluating community based oral health programs. In addition, structured reflection activities were incorporated. Data from online discussions and end-of-course evaluations were gathered from one cohort of students before the courses were redesigned and two cohorts after the redesign:

Before Redesign

- 2008 cohort
- 15 students responded
- 55% response rate

After Redesign

- 2009, 2010 cohorts
- 46 students responded
- 85% response rate

Results

	Agree or Strongly agree	
	2008	2009/2010
Through my Senior Practicum, I developed a greater awareness of oral health needs in the community	87%	91%
Through my Senior Practicum, I developed skills needed by dental hygienists to address oral health disparities in the community	80%	91%
Through my Senior Practicum, I learned how to evaluate the impact of a program on the community site	47%	87%
Because of the experiences I had during my Senior Practicum, I feel an increased responsibility to use my professional skills to help address oral health disparities in the community	87%	91%
Because of the things I learned in my Senior Practicum, I have already or will likely choose a career path that provides oral health care to a diverse patient population in a community-based setting	33%	74%
Through my Senior Practicum, I developed confidence to work with elderly, culturally diverse, disadvantaged, and/or physically challenged populations	93%	76%

Student Comments



- 1 "This experience has motivated and compelled me to do something with my training that will make a sustained difference in the lives of local children."
- 2 "I feel like I have a much better perspective on the development and challenges associated with creating a public health program. I would love to use my education to help those in need."
- 3 "I've been to Honduras and witnessed first-hand how strong the need is for dental care in that country, but I now know that this health disparity exists in our country as well."
- 4 "I think it is part of our professional responsibility to have some involvement in public health projects."

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that preparatory experiences and structured reflection had a positive influence on students' awareness of and skills for dealing with oral health disparities. Most significantly, there was a profound impact on students' career decision-making process, with twice the proportion of students indicating that they probably will seek a position treating diverse patients in a community-based setting. However, instructors should also be aware that greater reflection on health disparities may decrease students' confidence in working with disadvantaged populations, likely because they become more acutely aware of the challenges of working with these populations.

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