Introduction

The International Virtual Exchange Program (IVEP) is a fascinating opportunity to explore, learn, and understand the differences of other students in different states and countries. The ability to dig deeper into understanding various topics and conducting discussion from people who differ vastly from us culturally is a bright opportunity for education. The program was started with the intention of exploring different college students’ experiences and thoughts regarding equity of health between four colleges: UNIBE - a private, non-profit university embedded in beautiful Costa Rica, Sam Houston College in Texas, Bronx Community College, and very own College of Staten Island. Each week provided a valuable and substantial discussion concerning global health and the issues of inequity, such as COVID-19 and its impact on vaccination, interculturalism, focused psychology on first aid. The purpose of this program is to indoctrinate others of pertinent problems that are affecting the livelihood of others. The International Virtual Exchange Program is an invaluable resource for students to understand the health of the world and how others view global public health especially in current times where things seem turbulent and troubling. By participating within this program students are engaged and willing to learn from fellow students who are nurses, psychologists, doctors and other prominent members of healthcare and education.

Objectives

1. Lectures provided by faculty will address topics in Global Health.
2. The International Virtual Exchange Program will be the forerunner for in-person study abroad (when available) for Bronx Community College students, faculty at UNIBE, College of Staten Island, and Texas University.
3. Students will develop a peer-to-peer mentor and network relationship.
4. Students and faculty will apply as well as increase their digital communication skills developed through this virtual experience.
5. A community of practice will have been formed for further collaborative programs.

Literature Review

It is essential that individuals studying in the healthcare profession have the knowledge and awareness of global health in the context of providing patient care. Global health can be defined as, “all health issues that surpass class, color, culture, creed, economy, borders and thus is a common global ground of health” (Thapa, 2020, p. 705). Nurses and nursing students can be key players in promoting global health in their practice by participating in international exchange programs. According to Sandra J. Leinonen, MA, RN (2006) nursing exchange programs allow nurses to increase their understanding of global healthcare issues and professional practice concerns. Leinonen (2006) states, “Establishing relationships with nurses from various cultural backgrounds expands opportunities to learn, empower, and value other cultures” (p. 16). Through this collaborative approach, nurses and healthcare professionals alike are able to foster partnerships that expand their knowledge of global health.

In 2011, a Professional Global Health Fellowship program that was supported by the U.S Department of State aimed to foster “long-term sustainable partnerships between health professionals and educators in Zambia and the U.S” (Wilson et al., 2014, p. 97). Through this international exchange program, thirteen Zambian and twelve Malawan Fellows who worked in the healthcare profession were selected to visit the United States. Additionally, nineteen Faculty Fellows from three U.S universities: University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), Sanford University McWhorter School of Pharmacy (MSF), and University of California San Francisco (UCSF) were selected to visit Malawi and Zambia. The U.S visits included a 3-day Fellows Congress in Washington, D.C, a 2-week workshop on Interprofessional Education held at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), and a 2-week mentoring period (Wilson et al., 2014). After the completion of the U.S visits, the UCSF, UAB, and MSF Faculty Fellows made 2-week visits to Malawi and Zambia. There, the Faculty Fellows had the opportunity to provide seminars and workshops and visit hospitals, clinics, and community programs. Plans to foster international partnership included “plans for joint research and publications, sharing teaching and educational materials, participating in online classes and other collaborative case studies” (Wilson et al., 2014, p. 100).

International exchange programs are able to bring diverse healthcare professionals together in order to increase awareness to foster collaboration among students.

Methods

Students participated in the virtual exchange program over a course of six weeks. Meetings were held weekly for a duration of ninety minutes via Zoom. Every week a specific theme was discussed, with each school taking turns in presenting ideas and research.

Discussion Topics:

- Virtual Triage and Disaster Simulation:
  - Discussed disasters and local threats unique to the geographic locations of IVEP participants.
  - Addressed mental health implications of disasters.
  - Outlined triage methods in emergency situations.
  - Highlighted the importance of disaster preparedness education.
  - Implemented solutions to streamline virtual disaster preparedness training.
- Academic Burnout in Undergraduate Students:
  - Increased burnout has a negative correlation w/ academic success. Higher rates of burnout found in students attending public universities. Students reported a variety of symptoms such as gastrointestinal issues, anxiety, and depression.
  - Open communication and understanding between students and educators was found to be the missing link between improving support and decreasing burnout.
- Learned Helplessness in STM students:
  - Dr. Diane Banks discussed her research exploring the relationship between common stressors experienced by STEM students and their effect on cortisol levels.
  - Using a four phase research design plan created an ideology for participants and other viewers to understand how cortisol levels are affected by stressors throughout the semester.
  - Learned helplessness, theorized by Maier & Seligman in 1976, explains that the behavioral changes occur due to exposure to the perception of uncontrollable stress or adversity.
  - Dr. Diane Banks created interactive polls which facilitated student and faculty engagement to identify common stressors experienced by STEM students and faculty alike.
- Student Panel Discussion on COVID-19 Related Topics:
  - A questionnaire was provided prior to the scheduled session to gather information from each school regarding personal perspectives and experiences related to COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines.
  - A student panel representative, from each of the four schools participating in the program facilitated discussions throughout the session based on the information received in the questionnaire.
  - Topics of discussion included exacerbation of student stress and burnout due to COVID-19, distinguishing between COVID-19 information and misinformation, the meaning of a “return to normal”, healthcare inequities encountered during the pandemic, thoughts on mask mandates being lifted, the effect of COVID-19 on individuals and family members, vaccine hesitancy, clinical experiences during the pandemic and student/faculty perspectives on returning to college campuses in the fall.
- First Aid Psychologies:
  - Psychology students and faculty members from UNIBE presented key concepts and ideas regarding first aid psychology.
  - Information was delivered in the context of providing first aid psychology in Costa Rica which can also be implemented in broader contexts (ie. in the U.S and other countries).

Results

Compassion, education, and advocacy are the pillars of nursing and what make this career so impactful and rewarding. In line with that mentality, creating a space for cultural diversity and exploration allows for nursing students to explore the realms of other health care systems and practices. Fostering the ability to understand cultural differences from the perspective of other healthcare centralized individuals initiates a unique camaraderie and builds interprofessional relationships across seas. Not only were participants able to share individualized perspectives on topics such as triage and disaster, academic burnout in undergraduate students, learned helplessness in STEM students, COVID-19 and its effect globally, and first aid psychology, but they were able to gain insight as to how differing cultures handle their own tragedies and obstacles. The main takeaway from this experience is that the incorporation of different cultural outlooks in one’s own practice increases a nurse’s capacity for global compassion and cultural sensitivity.

Significance

Virtual exchange programs like this one exemplify the importance that the exchanging of ideas and knowledge has. Reflecting on the current situation that most students are in as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of virtual exchange programs is that much more necessary. Students are currently confined to virtual education, making it difficult for them to have access to environments that previously fostered collaboration and communication. This program created a space for students to not only learn from one another but openly discuss their thoughts and feelings, a task that cannot always be achieved during online lectures. As the media for educating students are changing with new technological advancements, social interaction among students and faculty must remain a priority. This virtual exchange program can serve as a blueprint for future programs that look to foster collaboration among students.

References


International Virtual Exchange Program: Fostering Global Health by Forming Intercultural Partnerships

Sara Filip RN, Mary Fowokan RN, Tara Gerbino RN, Ariana Moy RN, Alexarae Pomaro RN, Camille Ponce RN
Faculty Mentor: Professor Regina Lama