

A Qualitative Study Exploring an Undergraduate Community-Based Participatory Research Course



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Introduction

Background:

- College students face considerable challenges regarding food choices and health behaviors. They are notorious for consuming a diet low in fruits and vegetables and high in fat and added sugar, negatively impacting their overall health.¹
- Improving the overall health of this upcoming generation is critical in preventing chronic disease in future adults.
- A way to improve these poor health behaviors and create sustainable, positive health change is to involve stakeholders in the process and progress of designing, implementing, and evaluating programs. Utilizing a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach requires the participants to design the methods of the program.²
- In this sense, college students would guide the change and programming necessary to alter their poor health behaviors in a way that is intriguing to their population.

Summary:

- A course was adapted to teach CBPR concepts using experiential learning.
- Seven students enrolled in the course from two land grant universities and met once a week for 50 minutes.
- Students developed and conducted a Needs Assessment of their campus (surveys, interviewed health/wellness professionals, and assessed environment).
- Students used the information to create a health program pitch after the semester ended to capture student experiences.

Objective:

- To explore undergraduates' learning experiences and skill-set development after completing an experiential learning course focused on CBPR.

Methods

Evaluation Methods:

- Thematic analysis was conducted using two transcribed focus group discussions (N = 7) recorded at the University of Maine in January 2022.
- Each focus group consisted of three to four students.
- Eight questions were discussed regarding the role of CBPR, and the knowledge and experience gained from the course.
- Focus groups were transcribed by one research assistant and reviewed for accuracy by a second research assistant.
- Transcriptions were then coded for primary themes.

Results

Themes showcased students' understanding and application of CBPR concepts and the benefits of experiential learning in undergraduate courses. **Three Key Themes Emerged:**

I. How to Tailor Programs to Meet Needs

"You can't force people to participate. Figure out what the issues are and then go from there. This gives you an idea of what students need."

"...Instead of just looking at the community and saying okay I'm going to do this programming, you're actually working with the community to see what works best..."

"It's getting feedback from these groups and trying to make themes."

II. Understanding the Importance of CBPR

"CBPR allows us to meet participants where they are and have more of a mutual interactions for promoting and programming."

"It is very effective way to solve problems because it directly involves the demographic of people that the problem relates to."

"You can tell a lot about the community by going into it and doing audits..."

"I really appreciate the emphasis of getting on the ground level... I think it is an overall more holistic method, and just a better approach to get the actual input of participants rather than making assumptions from outside."

Results

III. Advantages of Experiential Learning Activities

"It was nice to actually apply skills we've learned... I feel like this course was nice because we got to do work that would be doing after college."

"... We're trying to fix the issue that's going on within our own community...It's real, you're not just being told it. We're observing it."

Conclusion

After completing the course, students understood the concepts of CBPR. Students reported that they received valuable hands-on learning experiences, thereby acknowledging the advantages of CBPR and experiential learning activities. The course successfully advanced the knowledge base of CBPR and the health programming skills of students. Students understood the importance of CBPR and how to tailor a program to meet community needs.

The results of this study justify the use of CBPR to create sustainable and tailored health programs. Specifically, in college students, CBPR is a powerful motivator to get students involved in positive health changes that can benefit future generations and reduce the risk of chronic disease.

References

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