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The Implementation Of A Study Abroad Course For Nursing

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No Abstract

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To broaden the opportunities for nursing students at our college to study abroad, a new elective course involving study in Mexico was designed. Research supports the notion that study abroad programs positively impact the development of cross-cultural skills and global understanding of college students.¹ According to a longitudinal study conducted by the Institution for the International Education for Students, benefits from studying abroad include enhanced intercultural development and higher levels of personal and social growth.² These characteristics are important for future nurses who will be challenged to provide care to culturally diverse patients and who will likely work within an ethnically diverse healthcare team.

Assessment of Need/ Feasibility

For the past few years, our school has offered nursing students an elective course involving travel for 5 weeks to Zambia, Africa, where students primarily work giving basic care to clients in a rural hospital. Because of the expense, distance, and time involved, few students have participated. During the summer of 2004, the faculty began to brainstorm about what features would make a course involving international study more attractive to our students.

Our college is a coeducational, private, liberal arts institution located in western North Carolina. The mission is the development of the whole person. Building a sense of community, clarification of personal faith, and leadership for service in the world are all strongly promoted. There are 66 undergraduate majors in the liberal arts, the sciences, and preprofessional

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programs. Graduate degrees are offered in the arts, sciences, and business. The division of nursing is in the school of health sciences.

When surveyed, most nursing students indicated interest in participation in a study abroad course if the time did not interfere with other course work, it was not prohibitively expensive, and it was shorter in duration than 2 weeks. A meeting was arranged with the director for international studies to discuss a trip to Mexico as an option. Our region has a substantial and growing Hispanic population, so a study in Mexican culture was deemed relevant. The director informed me that our college affiliates with another college that has a house in the Yucatan peninsula that they use for their study abroad program in Mexico. She suggested that we might be able to rent the house from them for lodging. Because Mexico is also reasonably close, we anticipated that travel expenses would be manageable.

Setting Up the Course

Meetings with the dean for academic affairs and the head of the nursing division were critical in establishing the course description, objectives, credit hour allocation, and assignments. To offer students an alternative experience to the Zambia course, the trip

to Mexico would involve service projects (service learning is a mission of the college in general) and a comparative analysis of the healthcare and nursing education systems. A significant portion of the study involved pretrip preparation in the way of planning for the service projects and fund-raising. While abroad, students were required to keep a journal of feelings and insights, participate in projects and tours, and write both pretrip and posttrip reflection essays. Fluency in the Spanish language was not a prerequisite; however, all except 2 students had at least some knowledge of Spanish from previous high school or college courses.

The course involved a 10-day trip for 3 credit hours in nursing. It was sequenced in the intersession between spring and summer sessions so that students could still attend summer school if desired. Specific objectives included the following:

- Develop appropriate knowledge base needed for compassionate interaction with clients during study abroad experience.
- Plan appropriate therapeutic strategies for various service projects for clients, giving consideration to cultural, environmental, developmental, and biopsychosocial conditions.
- Use nursing knowledge base to develop and implement various

service projects for the Mexican people.

- Display problem-solving skills related to planning for and engaging in a trip out of the country.
- Demonstrate ethical approaches in professional practice as related to health promotion projects in Mexico.
- Demonstrate professional responsibility and accountability for protecting the rights of clients during health promotion endeavors in Mexico.
- Analyze the impact of legal and economic impact on the health-care system in Mexico.

Once the course was organized, I had additional meetings with the director for international studies to determine what paperwork would be required for the college when students study abroad and to make arrangements with our affiliate college in the Midwest for using their facility. There is a form that students desiring to travel abroad for courses must have initiated by personnel in several offices, including the registrar, academic affairs, the business office, their academic advisor, and financial aid. There is also a permission form.

The travel agency was also engaged at this time to project the approximate cost for students and organize a travel itinerary. To recruit students for the course, a flyer was designed with pertinent information on the course and attached to student's bulletin boards. A PowerPoint presentation also was created and presented to sophomore and junior nursing students at their first class meetings in the fall. Over 40 students expressed initial interest in the course. They were encouraged to speak with parents and significant others and, when they felt ready, make a definite commitment to send me an e-mail. Prospective applicants were required to have a cumulative grade point average of at least 2.5 because that is a requirement of the college for study abroad. No other criteria were required initially for participating, primarily because this was a pilot program. Because I was the only instructor who would be going on the trip, the decision was made to limit enrollment to 12 students. I accepted the first 12 students

who responded with definite commitments and started a waiting list in case someone on the original list dropped out.

Logistics

Notification of the class roster was sent to the Registrar, dean of students, academic nursing program advisors for each of the students, and the travel bureau so they could arrange the ticketing for travel. An account was set up in the college business office specifically for the Mexico trip to handle the intermittent payments by the students and expenses (e.g., the housing deposit and travel deposits were due during the fall semester). Also, during this interval, I began having monthly meetings with students. Initially, the director for international studies attended these meetings to introduce the paperwork required by the college and to direct students regarding how to fill them out. Also, she answered questions regarding how to secure a passport, luggage size, what to pack, and other practical questions the students had at the time. During later meetings, we focused on ideas for fund-raising and the academic expectations of the course. The students brainstormed about conducting doughnut sales and car washes, and I investigated the opportunity to secure some funding from the college through an internal grant to pay for an interpreter.

Money and Projects

The fund-raising activities were selected, organized, and conducted. The students sold doughnuts twice and scented candles once, as well as hosting a raffle. I wrote the grant application and was awarded a small grant from the college. Students and I continued having monthly meetings to solidify the projects we would do for the trip. We decided to collect used eyeglasses to donate, to assemble hygiene kits for impoverished women and toy/activity bags for children, and Spanish New Testaments for distribution. Some of the fund-raising money would also be used for donations in Mexico to needy organizations.

I constructed a checklist and a file for each student to track their pay-

ments for the course and completion of documents required for travel. I kept copies of each document and sent the originals to the international studies office. Two students were forced to drop out because of unforeseen conflicts, but they were readily replaced by the next 2 students on the waiting list.

Finalization

Students registered for the course in April, and we had our last meeting to finalize plans. We packed the items they had collected for the service projects in large containers and made arrangements to meet at the airport. Students were encouraged to secure international calling cards, and a few pesos from their local banks before departure. I hired a consultant through the director at the college in Mexico to set up our itinerary based on the course objectives. This director also helped us to secure a van for transportation to our service and tour sites with a trilingual driver who was fluent in Spanish, English, and Mayan.

The Trip!

We flew from Charlotte to Cancun and took a van to Merida, Mexico, the capital of the Yucatan. The facility in Merida was not just a "house," but the mansion of a former governor. Students were housed 3 to a room, dormitory-style, in bunk beds, and shared bathrooms. There was a nice living room area for seminars and a screened-in classroom in the back. Meals and housekeeping were included in the room and board fee.

During the 10-day trip, students were able to tour 3 hospitals representing each of 3 levels of healthcare in Mexico: public, private, and social security (working class). In addition to these activities, students also enjoyed a tour of the University of the Yucatan School of Nursing. Their favorite service project was the participation in a mobile health clinic to an impoverished Mayan Indian village, where students assisted with set-up and take-down, taking vital signs, distribution of prescribed medications, teaching basic hygiene to the local villagers through an interpreter, and distribution of the hygiene kits we brought.

Other projects included a visit to a local orphanage (playing with the orphans and distribution of the toy/activity kits we brought), visiting with residents at a nursing home for the elderly and disabled, and the distribution of eyeglasses and New Testaments at the Red Cross and cancer hospitals.

Time was allotted for cultural opportunities as well. We attended a festival, went to a Sunday market, visited the Mayan ruins, and went to the beach. During free time, students wrote in their journals, took walks in the neighborhood, went shopping, and visited the nearby Internet cafe, enjoyed siestas, telephoned home, or visited with one another. During the evening, we had seminars to share impressions of the day and for devotions. During seminar time, students were eager to compare and contrast observations of the culture and health-care system in Mexico with America's. It was a good time for sharing of insights, evaluation of activities, and planning for the days to come.

Evaluation

According to their journal entries, course evaluations, and verbal reports, students regarded this experience very favorably. For most of the students, their primary motivation in participating in the trip was to gain cultural insights, and they reported in their journals a sense of accomplishment in doing so. They particularly remarked about learning many new things about the Mexican health-care system and the nursing education system. They also reported that these cultural insights would be valuable for their professional nursing careers. Most of the students felt that they would be more culturally sensitive to

patients and colleagues of all ethnicities and more understanding and empathic with people in general. Several mentioned corrections of erroneous perceptions they had held before the trip, such as the previous notion that all of Mexico is dirty and poor with low-quality healthcare. Their favorite part of the trip was the feeling of helping others. Almost all students mentioned a feeling of sadness over the poverty of the Mayans we visited and an overwhelming sense of gratitude for personal blessings they have long taken for granted. Their only complaint was the heat, as temperatures were often in the high 90s or low 100s.

The Future

We plan to offer the course again next year. For the next trip to Mexico, an application packet will be required that will include the paperwork for the college and an information sheet for each student interested in participating. The pretrip essay will also be due with the application. This essay is intended to encourage prospective participants to consider their reasons for wanting to participate and any pretrip perceptions about the Mexican health-care system and culture. We plan to present a report of this year's experience to the general college student body in the fall, which we hope will encourage students in other majors to consider studying abroad. We would also like to add a research component to the course and embrace a qualitative analysis of the students' journal entries. In addition, we are considering other study abroad options for our nursing program to complement the 2 courses we currently offer. Two possibilities include a collaborative effort with another nursing pro-

gram or embracing an opportunity to teach physicians in Lithuania nursing skills during our spring break.

The key to a successful study abroad program is probably somewhat individualized, but based on our experience with this course, it seems that certain elements were relative in contributing to a positive endeavor. First, we enjoyed support from our college. Our college has a mission to support international study, and the international studies office was very valuable in providing assistance. We were awarded funding, and the college administrators were enthusiastic about the project. Also, creating a course based on the needs of our particular students was relevant. We were able to ascertain specific characteristics that our students regarded as desirable for a study abroad course, and then plan accordingly. Finally, we organized carefully, planning with attention to detail. We began early making essential contacts, secured student commitment early, and had regular communication with students and relevant college offices throughout the planning process.

In a profession that demands culturally competent care, studying abroad is one way to teach cultural awareness to students. Aspects of how such a course was implemented at our college will have application for others who are considering instituting, expanding, or revising a study abroad program for nursing students.

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