Title: Using a Nutrition Mentoring Program to Build the Bridge with Community Partners

Abstract:

Mentoring is an effective strategy that can be used to help train and guide emerging professionals to be successful in their career. Specific to nutrition in healthcare, the research and recommendations are adapting at the drop of a dime. The concept of experiential learning experiences for health science students has begun to emerge as one way to train the next generation of healthcare providers. This paper describes the evidence of a successful nutrition-focused mentoring program that built a collaborative partnership between University students and practicing community partners. Creating programs that embodies experiential learning, while being mutually beneficial for both parties is the next step to stay current and promote partnerships in an everchanging environment.

Key Words: experiential learning, mentorship program, community engagement, nutrition partnership

Introduction

Healthcare is a landscape that continually changes due to the advances in research and medical practices. Since the field of medicine keeps changing, it is imperative to educate and train the next generation of providers about information beyond the textbook, such as patient care or practice management. (Mcwilliam, Desai, & Greig, 1997) It seems too often that students who complete their college degree in a health science discipline are left with the question “What’s Next?”. While it would be ideal to jump right into patient care, and often is the reality, many of those patients that they will see in the clinical setting are not your typical classroom
case study. It is for this reason that experiential learning or community-based learning (CBL) is an essential training tool for the success of the next generation of healthcare providers.

Community-based learning (CBL) is a concept to bridge the connection between scholars, students and community members or organizations, with the intent to benefit all involved. (Jacoby, 2014) There are many different forms of CBL, all of which are important to the growth and development of those involved. One method that has been shown to be effective in gaining knowledge and improving their skillsets in a field-based experiential learning opportunity. (Fortier et al., 2015) Having the hands-on capabilities with a community partner can be an effective strategy to teach university students. Moreover, it is an opportunity to connect students with community partners, strengthening the bond between the University and the local community. Specific to healthcare, programs that inject the health science students into community organizations provide a valuable learning experience to improve patient care. (Townsend, Gray, & Forber, 2016)

Universities are equipped with the personnel, equipment and students all of which can effectively benefit the local community. However, for the most part, they are underutilized. (Maurrasse, 2001) There is a disconnect between the resources at an institution and its capacity to assist in its local community. When programs are established connecting the two, it is often seen as a unidirectional relationship, where the university is responsible for helping the community partner. In reality, this should be a mutualistic relationship where each end of the partnership will reap the benefits. When this relationship shows reciprocity, it can facilitate a stronger bond and relationship that will continue to grow, rather than being a onetime program. (Hart & Northmore, 2011; Vickers, Harris, & McCarthy, 2004)
This notion of reciprocity is often used when describing the definition of mentorship; the reciprocal relationship between mentor and mentee to promote both the satisfaction and development of each party. (Pfund, Byars-Winston, Branchaw, Hurtado, & Eagan, 2016) A mentoring experience is one that can help improve communication skills, support professional development and gain tactical skills in the field. (Lipscomb & An, 2013) While this benefit is seen for the mentee, it is equally beneficial for the mentor. There have been various programs, across medical disciplines, that concluded that mentorship opportunities were strongly supportive to professional development and career advancement. (Eller, Lev, & Feurer, 2014; Stubbs et al., 2016) Moreover, in order for a mentoring program to be successful, there are several key attributes including developing a relationship of trust, establishing goals and collaborating to solve problems, that need to be fostered prior to starting off. (Byington, 2010)

The overlap is evident between an experiential learning experience and a mentoring program, both connecting the university to its community. For this reason, it was investigated if a nutrition mentoring program could be an effective way to bridge this connection and it be mutually beneficial to advance the field of nutrition and dietetics, a key player in the healthcare team.

**Case Study**

The RD Mentorship Program was established to bring together nutrition and dietetics students (known as “University Students (U-S)” and practicing Registered Dietitians (known as “Community Partners (C-P)”)). This bridge was created to foster a productive relationship between an emerging professional and a currently practicing professional. The main objective of this program was to facilitate a relationship among the university and the Community Partners, a mutualistic relationship.
The RD Mentorship Program first recruited the C-Ps (i.e. mentors). Recruitment was completed via email, word-of-mouth and at professional development meetings. Each community partner was asked to complete a survey to provide contact information and details of what project they wanted to work on with a mentee. This program focused on working on one project during the duration of the program. Each project was based on the C-Ps need and interest, thus creating buy in from this partner. Additionally, this gave the opportunity for the U-S to be exposed to a variety of different projects that they would be matched with. Once mentor recruitment was completed, then applications opened for the U-S. Recruitment was completed via email, word-of-mouth and at club meetings. Each U-S (i.e. mentee) reviewed potential community partner’s project ideas and then ranked them in order of whom they would like to be partnered with. After all recruitment was completed, pairing was done based on ranked preference and qualifications.

The RD Mentorship Program was initiated in Spring 2016 at Texas A&M University and the surrounding community (Bryan-College Station, Texas). It has since expanded its reach to a broader audience as of Fall 2018 to include both Texas A&M University students and community and the University of North Florida students and its community (Jacksonville, Florida). The number of participants in the program are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Mentoring Matches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>C-Ps Involved</th>
<th>U-S Involved</th>
<th>Total Participants</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2016</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2016 &amp; Spring 2017</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While the sheer number of participants over the past three years has been a success, there have also been some valuable takeaway lessons from this program. The participants, both mentors and mentees, have rated this program as highly satisfied with their experiences. (Hicks-Roof, 2018) Additionally, qualitative feedback has shown that mentors perceive students as quality assets to their practice and profession. (Hicks-Roof & Beathard, 2018)

In each semester of the program, the C-Ps continue to elaborate on how their partnership with the U-S was bidirectional. The growth and development were not meant solely for the mentee, rather it was a mutually beneficial relationship. Each pair was able to focus on a project that met the needs of the C-P. Some of the projects, but not limited to, include food photography, website development, poster presentations, animal research projects, grocery store tours, handout development. While some of these focuses are part of an every day dietitian responsibility, others are an untraditional experience for the U-S. The most recent launch of the program, including both Texas A&M University and University of North Florida students and communities set a precedence that this program was able to expand and have a larger reach. Both a majority of U-S and C-Ps have a positive experience as part of the program and are eager to participate in the future.

This study was approved by the Texas A&M University and the University of North Florida Institutional Review Board.
Conclusion

Bridging the gap between University Students and Community Partners is essential as health research demands this ongoing, collaborative process to train the next generation of providers. It is important that within these partnerships, it is recognized that it be a mutually beneficial relationship, both reaping the benefits of the commitment. In order to sustain this collaborative nature, programs such as the RD Mentorship Program, set the stage for how this partnership can grow and develop. Securing buy in from the community partner by having them initiate the project idea was imperative to this program’s success. A strong, sustainable partnership is vital to building programs, such as described here, connecting academia and the community. (Robias, Glazer, & Mentzel, 2018)

Specific to nutrition, this program offered a community-based, experiential learning that provided hands-on experience emulating the life of a dietitian. There are numerous job opportunities for dietitians, including clinical, but also food service, private practice, sports, media, research, academia and government. While a dietitian is one of the critical healthcare team members, the role of a dietitian varies according to profession focus. The governing body for nutrition professionals, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, has acknowledged the value and needs of mentoring experiences for both new and currently practicing dietitians. (Kicklighter et al., 2017) Moreover, as nutrition continues to be an evolving discipline, the opportunity of a hands-on experience can be enlightening for both old and new practitioners.

There are merits to training the next generation. First, it is widely known that a mentoring experience has been attributed to an enhanced mentee self-efficacy and career satisfaction. (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008) Secondly, a partnership between a student and their community can serve as a foundation of hands-on learning, especially in the complex system of
healthcare. (Carroll, Clancy, Bal, Lalani, & Woo, 2018) Lastly, being a part of a community-based program can serve as a motivation to participate in future community engagement, thus contributing to building an engaged society. (Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 2016)

While the benefits are evident, there subtle implications from a program such as this. Healthcare demands are projected to continue to increase as the United States populace is aging. (HHS, 2019) Training the next generation by having one-on-one guidance with a community mentor is an invaluable experience to teaching the trick of the trade. The real-life application of nutrition practices is something that cannot be taught solely with a textbook. As the demands of healthcare continue to grow, there needs to be a workforce ready to handle this head on. Experiential learning experiences that provide opportunities to learn from a practicing professional is one way to ensure the readiness of the next generation.

Future research needs to continue to expand and learn from community-based mentoring programs to enhance the outlook for current and future healthcare professionals. This research needs to delve on how and why it is important to foster this academia to community partnerships and how to build a sustainable and mutually beneficial program. Lastly, insight into how these programs have short and/or long-term implications on the skills and care delivered by health providers.
References


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