Cultural Competency for School Health Educators
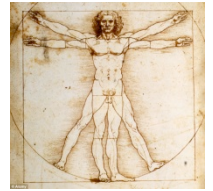
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Purpose

Inclusion of diversity in academic institutions is essential to teach students skills they need to thrive and lead in today's work environments. These skills include the abilities to work well with students and colleagues from diverse backgrounds; to view issues from multiple perspectives; and to anticipate and respond with sensitivity to the needs and cultural differences. For many years our university has been identified as homogenous for numerous characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. In the last decade the value of diversity among faculty and students has increased dramatically.

Definitions:

Culture: Knowledge, experience, values, ideas, attitudes, skills, tastes, and techniques that are passed on from more experienced members of a community to new members

Diversity: Divergence among people based on age, culture, health status, ethnicity, experience, gender, sexual orientation and combination

Methods

The Diversity Survey, a 21-item survey including Likert Scale and short answer/essay items, was completed by 690 graduating students in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 academic years. Students were assessed on their views related to departmental and university focus on diversity; faculty's acceptance and accommodation of diverse populations within the curriculum and classroom; personal skill development related to becoming a culturally competent health professional; personal knowledge related to diverse populations; willingness to work with people of diverse backgrounds; and participation in various diversity awareness.

Results

The majority of respondents (71.2% - 87.5%) indicated positive attitudes related to faculty/staff cultural competency, with room for improvement on some items. Some respondents disagreed or were neutral about faculty/staff use of gender-neutral language (21.7%) and singling out minority students (19.0%). Statistical analyses indicated significant improvement between the years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 for the following variables: faculty were accepting of all individuals regardless of diversity, avoided stereotyping by military status, were open to learning about other cultures, use of neutral language indicating acceptance of varied sexual orientation, and accommodated students for religious reasons.

Conclusions

In general, students had positive responses related to culture and diversity. Increases in knowledge and professional skills should be ongoing to provide effective health education. Cultural competency is a critical framework for inclusive and effective health education.

<u>**Suggestions to Increase Cultural Competency**</u>

- Heighten personal awareness
  - ▶ Understand six fundamental patterns of cultural differences
    1) Different communication styles
    2) Different attitudes toward conflict
    3) Different approaches to completing tasks
    4) Different decision-making styles
    5) Different attitudes about open emotion and personal matters
    6) Different approaches to knowing
  - ▶ Recognize any personal biases
  - ▶ Separate personal biases from professional interaction
  - ▶ Learn about other cultures
- Transfer personal knowledge into professional settings such as the classroom
  - ▶ Determine if expertise addresses regional/worldwide diversity and responsibility for individual and international interactions
  - ▶ Materials, curricula, services, and resources should benefit all of those targeted
  - ▶ Are activities developed according to information about the targeted audience?
  - ▶ Evaluation techniques must meet the needs of the targeted audience
- Create an inclusive environment
  - ▶ Use inclusive language - written and oral, appropriate literacy level
  - ▶ Accommodate diverse students' needs (i.e. learning abilities, physical abilities, religious accommodations, etc.)
  - ▶ Have members of the target group help create materials and activities

<u>**Resources**</u>

- **Community Tool Box:** online resource for those working to build healthier communities and bring about social change. It offers thousands of pages of tips and tools for taking action in communities. (http://ctb.ku.edu/en)
- **Teaching Tolerance:** provides a variety of information, teaching tips, activities and additional resources for working with high school students. (http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/culture-classroom)
- **Project Implicit:** provides a variety of quick online tests to measure associations that may be related to biases and/or stereotypes. (http://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html)
- **NEA's Diversity Toolkit:** this online toolkit provides an introduction to the multiple facets of diversity. It offers basic information, a short list of strategies and tools, and suggestions for how to find out more. (http://www.nea.org/tools/diversity-toolkit.html)
- **The National Association for Multicultural Education:** non-profit organization that advances and advocates for equity and social justice through multicultural education. This organization is for all levels of education and all disciplines. It provides resources for educators, administrators and students. (http://www.nameorg.org/index.php)