Developing Community Partnerships for Service-Learning

Objective: The purpose of this study was to investigate the needs of current and potential community partners related to developing a more sustainable service-learning partnership.

Methods: This quality improvement study collected qualitative data using grounded theory and semi-structured interviews regarding the needs and roles of community partners in the UMMC’s Occupational Therapy doctoral level service-learning program.

Results: The researchers identified the characteristics of a compatible partner (adequate communication, mutual benefit, etc.), as well as the barriers to compatibility (conflicting hours, unrealistic expectations, etc.). Based on these findings, five out of the eight community partners interviewed were deemed compatible for an ongoing partnership with the UMMC OTD Service-Learning Program.

Conclusion: Based on the results, the student investigators were able to provide suggestions to improve the UMMC OTD service-learning program/community partner relationships. Further research could contribute additional information on scheduling methods, approaches to obtaining continuous feedback on student performance, and developing an effective matching process between students and facilities.

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

Service-learning is an essential tool used to enhance learning in higher-education settings. The mission of the service-learning program within the Occupational Therapy Department at the University of Mississippi Medical Center is to “develop healthier communities and committed health care professionals through leadership in service and community engagement.” There are many factors that are necessary to establish a long-standing, structured relationship with community partners, such as an open loop of communication, benefits for both students and partner, and meeting the needs of both parties (Karasik and Wallingford, 2007; Schneier et al., 2018; Davis & Dempsey, 2018).

There is little evidence in the literature about effective ways to establish and maintain a durable community partnership and this knowledge is necessary for the betterment of the UMMC OTD service-learning program.

PURPOSE

Primary Aims:
1. Identify potential community organizations compatible for long-term academic/community partnerships.
2. Investigate the level of knowledge and understanding that community organizations have regarding the process and purpose of service-learning.
3. Discover preferred means of communication and approaches for obtaining continuous feedback between the academic program and the community partners.

RESULTS

REGARDING PRIMARY AIM ONE, FIVE OF THE EIGHT COMMUNITY PARTNERS THAT WERE INTERVIEWED CONSIDERED COMPATIBLE FOR A MORE STABLE PARTNERSHIP WITH THE UMMC OTD SERVICE-LEARNING PROGRAM BASED ON THE CHARACTERISTICS IN THIS FIGURE. THESE INCLUDE MUSTARD SEED, EULORA WELTY AUTISM RESOURCE CENTER, HOMEPLACE, RIGG MANOR, AND HOPE HOLLOW.

LIMITATIONS

➢ Small sample size
➢ Time constraints
➢ Use of purposive sampling
➢ Interviewer reliability

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the OT students’ findings, the primary aims were met and characteristics of barriers to compatibility with specific partners were discovered. Considering the results, the students were able to provide suggestions to improve the UMMC OTD service-learning program into a community partnership. Further research could contribute additional information on forming a consistent schedule, approaches to obtaining continuous feedback on student performance, and developing an effective matching process between students and facilities.

CONCLUSION

Research Design Statement: This quality improvement study collected qualitative data using grounded theory and semi-structured interviews regarding the needs and roles of community partners in the UMMC’s Occupational Therapy doctoral level service-learning program.

Participants: The student researchers used purposive sampling to select eight potential community partners in the Jackson area that offer services to a variety of populations. The participants were chosen based on students’ previous experience and personal preferences with those sites.

Data collection instrument: Semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions designed to collect qualitative data. The interview comprised four sections designed to elicit responses to address primary aims.

Data collection process: All eight interviews were recorded and conducted by 1:2 student researchers and one UMMC faculty member. The research team then met to code the interviews and identify categories and overarching themes using Tesch’s Eight Steps in the Coding Process. The student researchers used a grounded theory method in conjunction with Tesch’s methods to identify and label the themes that emerged.

References available upon request.