

Service-Learning for Professional Track Dietetics Students

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Brief Description:

Utilizing Dietetic students not only enhances their learning but benefits the home-bound elderly population with whom they interact. This allows students to become comfortable with the geriatric population and facilitates their consideration of professional work in this area.

This submission was selected as part of a national challenge issued to leaders in all communities seeking new "best practices" and "best possibilities" for the future of nutrition and aging.

The Meals on Wheels, Inc. (MOWI) Healthy Aging and Independent Living (HAIL) initiative has proven to be a successful community-campus partnership and provide the necessary foundation for developing a pedagogical model that addresses critical community health issues among homebound elderly. The HAIL initiative is funded by the United Way of Tarrant County and supports innovative strategies and services that "help older adults with chronic disease and their caregivers learn to live well, in the community, for a longer period of time." This community-wide initiative is intended to help identify effective ways to impact the ever-increasing demands on the community's economy and infrastructure due to increased health care costs as a result of growth in the older demographic.

The MOWI HAIL program is aimed at self-management of health-related behaviors and includes diabetes and nutrition counseling as strategies for older adults in avoiding institutional placement and decreasing healthcare costs. Involving dietetics students in service-learning activities for the HAIL program has allowed MOWI to expand their outreach and client services for the purpose of improving nutritional health outcomes and decrease diabetes and related complications for seniors living in the community. For the last two years, professional-track dietetics students enrolled in the Coordinated Program in Dietetics at Texas Christian University have been able to participate each semester in the HAIL initiative to satisfy course objectives and core knowledge and still competency learning outcomes for entry-level dietitians. Additionally, students build on these skills by accomplishing service-learning outcomes that target program objectives and projected goals.

Homebound MOWI clients who have diabetes, are at increased risk of developing diabetes, or are at increased nutrition risk are assessed by MOWI Registered Dietitians in their home for nutrition and/or diabetes education needs. Based on the initial assessment, basic education is provided during the home visit by the Registered Dietitian (RD) or Certified Diabetes Educator (CDE), and a learning plan is developed. Additionally, the RD/CDE helps the client set a behavior change goal. Under the guidance of the RDs/CDE, students learn how to combine dietetics knowledge with professional practice applications in providing education and counseling services for seniors. Effective education applications include reinforcing education provided during the home visit, providing additional education in accordance with the learning plan, answering nutrition/diabetes-related questions by MOWI seniors, encouraging behavior goal achievement and assisting MOWI seniors to set new or additional client-driven behavior goals.

Ongoing evaluation of student learning outcomes shows that students are challenged personally and professionally in meeting program and service objectives. In helping MOWI clients achieve successful health outcomes, students gain a new understanding and perspective about the impact of their work in educating, counseling and facilitating client change. Students also note that when assisting clients to identify and set personal behavioral goals, they learned to be more flexible and to accommodate the individual needs of each client and their ability to make changes. Working with MOWI clients participating in the HAIL initiative has taught dietetics students that changing health behavior is a process that takes time and effective intervention approaches must take this into consideration. Additional comments show that students are also able to better understand their role in helping to achieve successful program outcomes that impact the community. By collaborating with MOWI RDs and CDE, students learn to take responsibility for their actions and contributions in piloting a model program with the potential for improving health care outcomes in homebound aging adults.

A poster presentation of this MOWI program has been accepted at the American Association of Diabetes Educators annual meeting in August, 2012.