

Research Briefs

KEY FINDINGS

- There are key differences between new and long-standing students that have already taken NAH courses.
- New students found the content based curriculum to be helpful in preparing them for entry into NAH programs.
- All students had a positive attitude towards the course instructor.
- Most students did not have a back-up plan in case they did not get into their NAH program of choice.

IMPLICATIONS

For Practice:

- Advisors should emphasize different reasons for taking the course other than the one-point gained towards the LVN program.
- Students should be made aware of other career opportunities.

For Policy:

- Course should be made mandatory for new students.
- Course should be limited to students who would benefit from the curriculum.

For Research:

- Research will continue using mixed-methods in Fall 2009 with pre and post focus groups and surveys.



College Success for Healthcare Pilot: Preliminary Study

IN an effort to improve students' performance and better prepare them for entering Nursing Allied Health (NAH) programs, a content-based curriculum was added to existing College Success courses in Spring 2009. A preliminary study was conducted in Summer 2009 to gauge students' attitudes, perceptions, and expectations of the course. The study found distinct differences between students who were new to NAH programs and those that had already taken a number of NAH courses. While all students felt that they had a good instructor for the course, for the most part only new students viewed the content-based curriculum as useful preparation for entry into NAH programs.

Background

Currently there is a serious shortage of nurses in the labor market. According to Perin's (2006) study "many of the low socioeconomic status minority students who aspire to associates degrees in nursing display low levels of academic preparedness." Perin also suggests that these difficulties could be overcome through the use of "nursing-specific tutoring, advisement, and counseling intervention." Perin's findings parallel what is seen in South Texas College's (STC) NAH programs, but the college has taken these recommendations one step further by offering a College Success course with a healthcare specific curriculum. In this particular course, students not only learn the skills that are set forth as part of the general college success courses, but also learn specifically about what is expected of them in a healthcare program. This contextualized course gives students a better understanding of how the material they have learned can be directly applied specifically to their field of study and healthcare career endeavors.

The program began in Spring 2009 with a small class of 12 students. Enrollment significantly increased the second time the course was offered in Summer 2009 with 28 students enrolling for the course during the first summer session. All courses were taught by the same instructor.

Purpose of Study

This preliminary study sought to discover students' attitudes, perceptions, and expectations of the College Success for Healthcare course. In addition to being the basis for a larger study to be conducted in Fall 2009, this research study will be used by the NAH programs to assist with career evaluations and educational preparation for NAH students. The information will also be utilized to better understand how STC can further assist these students and help them to make informed decisions about their academic and career endeavors.

Methodology

A qualitative study involving focus groups was employed to gain insight into this particular subject matter. Two focus groups were conducted (n=14) from students

who were enrolled in the College Success for Healthcare course during the first session of Summer 2009.

At the beginning of each focus group the purpose of the research study was explained and consent forms were signed by participants. Each focus group meeting was recorded and transcribed. Transcripts, qualitative memos, notes, and other data were inputted into Nvivo8 software to find common themes using a combination of coding methods including structural and descriptive coding.

Research Questions

In particular, this study sought to examine what students think about the curriculum, format, and instruction delivery of the course. Furthermore, this study examined students' levels of general preparedness and understanding of the requirements needed to be successful in healthcare professions, and sought to discover whether students entering this course have a back-up plan if their aspirations in the healthcare arena are not realized.

College Success for Healthcare Pilot: Preliminary Study (cont.)

Findings

Overall, coding suggested a mixed attitude towards the course, with distinct differences between students new to NAH programs and veteran students who had taken a number of NAH courses.

Reasons for taking the course

Several students mentioned that advisors had recommended they take the course. Students were also made aware that they could receive one point towards the system that is used to determine admissions into the Licensed Vocational Nursing (LVN) program. This was the main draw for veteran students who had been attempting to gain admission into the LVN program for a longer period of time. These students indicated that the point was their only motivation for taking the course. However, many students also mentioned that they were either required to take the course or it was recommended to them by friends or family members to improve their success in other college courses. While the majority of students suggested that they would recommend the course to other students, saying things such as, "I think that I would recommend it to anybody that would be going into a medical field," it was also suggested that the course is more helpful to students new to the college environment and that long-standing students might not get as much out of it. As put by one student, "I think this class should only be taken for new students who have never taken one college hour."

Course Curriculum

Students new to NAH felt the health-care specific curriculum afforded them a better understanding of what to expect once they were accepted into an NAH program. As one student said, "being exposed to this class, it's opening up our eyes into realizing that it's a lot of work." The students seemed to have a better understanding of what would be expected of them in healthcare courses. They also felt that the introduction to different amenities offered by NAH, such as open labs and the learning center, would be especially useful to them as they continued their college careers.

Course Instruction

One aspect of the course that all of the study participants seemed to agree on was a positive attitude towards their College Success for Healthcare instructor. All the students felt that the instructor's "enthusiasm" made the course more interesting. They felt the instructor's approach made them feel "special," and that "he devotes himself into answering questions" because "he just cares." Students also felt the course instructor was providing them with good preparation in respect to what would be expected of them as healthcare students. "He's talking to us straight. He's not telling us this course is going to be easy. No, he's telling us that it's going to be a hard course...You're going to want to quit. He's telling us what to expect."

Back-Up Plan

While a few students did indicate they had other plans if things did not work-out, the majority of students stated that they would persist and do whatever necessary to gain access into their program of choice. These students said they would take other NAH classes to improve their chances of gaining entry into an NAH program. Furthermore, several

students suggested that they might apply to nursing programs at other institutions.

Recommendations

Many students indicated that they have taken courses repeatedly in order to obtain better grades in hopes of being accepted into a nursing program. Responses to the different questions posed to the students seemed to indicate that students taking the course for the sole reason of gaining the one-point advantage are not benefiting as much from the curriculum as other students who are enrolled for different reasons.

This course should be made mandatory for students new to NAH programs. By enrolling in such a course, the college can prevent creating groups of students that take extra courses and display unrealistic persistence to enter certain NAH programs. While the expansion of the College Success for Healthcare course would assist new NAH students in their academic path towards a career in healthcare, veteran NAH students may not find the class to be as beneficial. Therefore, such students should be advised of different academic and career options available to them. While the one-point awarded as part of the admissions standards into the nursing program is an attractive incentive, it should not be the only catalyst for enrollment in this course.

Implications for Further Research

As previously indicated, this is a preliminary study. Research will continue using mixed-methods in Fall 2009 with a larger cohort. This data will be collected in the form of pre and post focus groups and surveys which will be conducted at the beginning and end of the semester.