

Academia-community partnership: An academic physical therapy course promoting health within the community

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Abstract

Introduction: Awareness of the importance of health promotion is increasing publicly as well as among policy makers in Israel and worldwide. Health promotion within the university is reflected in actions taken to improve the health of students and of the academic and administrative staff.

With the support of the Council for Higher Education, the University of Haifa has developed a variety of programs aimed at promoting social activism among its students and faculty. In this context, the university developed a “flagship project” intended to promote social solidarity and create links between underprivileged communities and academic knowledge through active student and faculty involvement.

This article describes and discusses an academic course taught at the Department of Physical Therapy, called “Issues in health promotion and risk prevention”. In the 2020/21 academic year this course was integrated in the university’s “flagship program”. The objective of this course is to demonstrate to the students and public the contribution of physical therapy to health promotion and social action. To this end, physical therapy students were required to implement health promotion principles while engaging in social activities among marginalized and underprivileged communities.

Description of the course: The course was taught to fourth-year physical therapy students. The theoretical part of the course included lectures, discussions, simulations, as well as work in small groups to analyze case descriptions and resolve clinical problems. The meetings were all conducted online through Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The faculty and administrative staff of the “flagship program” assisted the lecturer in recruiting communities interested in cooperating in this endeavor from Haifa and the surrounding area. Students in the course had to develop and implement a health promotion program with one community. Students and community members met twice during the implementation stage, and the programs were presented to the class, the lecturer, and the “flagship program” team.

Summary: Action-based learning is a powerful tool for promoting among students important personal and social skills such as commitment, empathy, and teamwork, which are not always addressed in academic teaching. The academic-community partnership in the course presented here exposed students to underprivileged communities and stressed the importance of developing health promotion programs for diverse populations. Further research is needed to evaluate the effect of action-based courses on improving the level of physical therapy care and commitment to promoting community health, as well as its effect in other fields within the physical therapy curriculum.

Keywords: Academic-Community Partnership, Health Promotion, Physical Therapy, Service Learning, Social Activism, Active Lifestyle