

Internationalization of nursing education programs through academic partnerships

By,

Dr. Janice Hawkins, Director of Community and Global Initiatives, Old Dominion University.
Susanna Holzer, Coordinator for International Partnerships and Students Exchange, Paracelsus Medical University

Dr. Kimberly Adams Tufts, Assistant Dean of Interprofessional Education
Carola Walter, Program Director Bavaria, Bachelor Program Nursing Science

In an increasingly interconnected world, nursing professionals must be prepared to deliver competent, culturally sensitive care to multicultural populations in diverse settings. A better understanding of health care systems across the globe, including challenges and disparities in health worldwide, is necessary to develop competencies that address the healthcare needs of the global population. Participation in international immersion experiences advance global health competencies and enhance cultural sensitivities (Kokko, 2011; Kulbok, Mitchell, Glick, & Greiner, 2012).

In an effort to broaden international immersion opportunities, Old Dominion University (ODU) in Norfolk, Virginia and Paracelsus Medical Privat University (PMU) in Salzburg, Austria established an annual exchange program for undergraduate nursing students. Each year, nursing students from PMU are invited to the ODU campus - while ODU nursing students visit Salzburg and Linz, Austria for a comparative study of nursing education and health care systems. Students at both institutions participate in pre-exchange learning activities that include an introduction to global health concepts and an overview of their respective nursing education and health care systems. In country, lectures, classroom experiences and clinical site observations focus on a comparison of health care systems, nursing education and nursing practice issues. Cultural immersion, an effective strategy to promote cultural competency in nursing students, is facilitated through enriching field trips and host family housing (Conroy & Taggart, 2016). In keeping with best practices, visiting students are paired with host nursing students who help them to manage language barriers and other cultural challenges. A [website](#) created by former participants offers an insider's view of the academic and cultural engagement.

The partnership, currently moving into the fourth year is a tremendous success. Students expand their knowledge of nursing practice in the international context gaining a more global perspective of health, health care systems and nursing practice. One ODU student wrote: "My experience on this youth psychiatric unit the past two days has definitely been very impactful and has had me thinking very much about what can be done to improve mental health care in the U.S." Similarly, a PMU student was impressed by the services offered at the Children's Hospital in Norfolk. She noted that nursing services are offered with children in mind and not "little adults." Intercultural experiences and knowledge are not only beneficial to health care providers but ultimately to the patients they serve.

While the initial institutional goals were to increase student participation in international education, the impact of the program has extended beyond the students to faculty and

researchers. Without leaving home, faculty and students of host institutions have expressed a heightened worldview of nursing and health care systems through their interactions with visiting students. The partnership has now expanded to include faculty visits to both institutions resulting in increased global knowledge of nursing education programs as well as clinical and research practices. Dr. Jürgen Osterbrink from PMU, who is internationally recognized for his expertise in non-pharmaceutical management of pain, traveled to Virginia as a visiting scholar to share his knowledge of pain management with ODU faculty and students. Likewise, Dr. Kimberly Adams Tufts and Dr. Karen Karlowicz, nursing education leaders, traveled to Austria to engage with nursing professionals and educators at PMU. Nursing faculty, particularly the leaders of the program, develop an international network of professional contacts. As a result, ODU and PMU nurse researchers have partnered on a research project that has expanded to include an international scope. The collective effort undertaken to write this article is another example of the international faculty connections that have developed as a result of the partnership. Overall,, cultural competencies, international perspectives and engagement have increased in the nursing programs of both institutions.

To achieve this success, some basic conditions were necessary. From the start, representatives from both institutions had the strong desire to collaborate for the benefit of student learning. This intrinsic motivation led to a “Memorandum of Understanding” (MoU) outlining the goals and expectations of each institution. Once the MoU was finalized, institutional representatives developed guidelines, structured programs, coordinated schedules and navigated logistical challenges. The program developers also attribute the success of the program to shared goals and vision of each institution as well as clear expectations of the program. Clearly defined program leaders from each institution who communicate frequently and work together in a trust-based relationship. Because the overarching goal of expanding a global vision for faculty and students is common to both institutions continued success is anticipated.

References

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