Service-Learning with older adults in care communities: Measures of attitude shifts in undergraduate students

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"Before arriving, [to nursing home] I pretty much thought I was going to a mental hospital. I thought the residents were going to be these hollow husks of a person, and I was going there to entertain them for a bit..."

The Problem

- Ageism may steer students in health care professions away from working with older adults

- Ageism may lead to negative attitudes especially towards individuals with dementia

Service-Learning—Part of an Evidence-Based Solution

- Combines classroom instruction with real-world experiences to promote advanced learning and attitudinal changes by building relationships with older adults (Celio et al., 2011; Felton & Clayton, 2011; Mcdonald et al., 2015; Salam et al., 2019)

- Mutual need

- Opportunities for reflection

Study Aims

- Determine whether attitudes of undergraduate students changed after a service-learning experience in which they engaged with older adults

- Determine the attitude shift using the *Dementia Attitudes Scale* and reflective journal entries

Rooted in AAA Framework

- Awareness-
  - Emphasis on acquiring knowledge and self-reflecting on gaps in knowledge

- Application-
  - Development of interactional skills with older adults as well as, development of reflection skills to improve clinical practices

- Advocacy/Attitude –
  - Attitude shift that may occur through both experiential learning and reflection

(Mahendra et al., 2013)

Participants

- 145 undergraduate students across 2 midwestern universities
  - One semester
  - Majored in Communication Sciences and Disorders
  - Mean age 21.5 years
  - 141 female participants; 4 male participants
  - 23% of the students reported previous experience working with adults with dementia

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Service-Learning Experience

- 15-30 hours interacting with persons living with dementia in long-term care environments
  - Conversing
  - TimeSlips
  - Meaningful activities
  - Crafts
  - Games
  - Sensory activities

Resources Required

- Classroom instruction
- On-site coaching and support
- Community partnerships
- Physical space
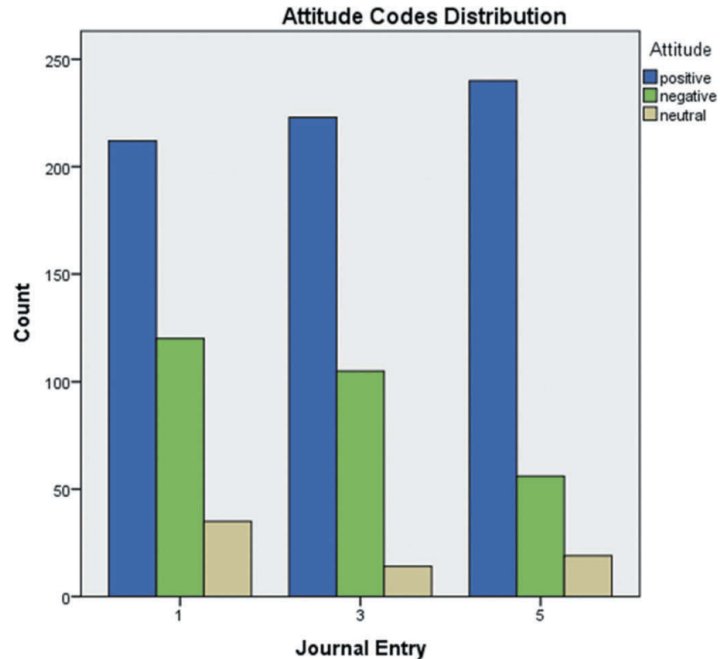
Results—Attitude Shifts

Figure 1. The distribution of positive, negative and neutral attitude codes for journal entries one, three and five.

Results Summary

- Increased positive attitudes toward this population

- Attitude shift over time as indexed by changing proportions of positive and negative attitude statements from student journals

- The *Dementia Attitudes Scale* results confirmed these attitude shifts

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Discussion

- Implementation science provides a wider lens to systemically transform education to meet our needs