Introduction

Interdisciplinary teamwork is an important model for delivering quality patient care in the current health care system. This model employs the practice of collaboration and enhances communication in order to make decisions as a unit toward a common goal. However, due to time constraints and logistics, many online students are not provided with opportunities for a group project to learn how to work together as a team and communicate effectively. Through purposeful course design, instructor guidance, and the inclusion of user-friendly technology in an online course, it is feasible to teach students the fundamentals of teamwork and collaboration in order to help them be better prepared for working in a health care environment with a high demand for those essential soft skills.

Objectives

Group research projects in an online health care administration course provide the following opportunities for healthcare administration and health sciences students:

- To learn course content related to the U.S. health system;
- To discover methods of collaboration to achieve the project goals;
- To increase the groups’ ease of communication, a Moodle discussion forum, and Zoom technology.
- To develop soft skills such as teamwork, collaboration, communication, time management, and problem solving.
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Subjects and Methods

- Two hundred seventy undergraduate students (270) were enrolled in four fully online health care administration courses over four semesters from Fall 2018 through Spring 2020 at a northwest university. These students were anonymously surveyed using the Moodle feedback tool.
- Students were randomly grouped and tasked with completing a group research project on U.S. health care organizations of their choosing and then presented the findings in a synchronous Zoom session.
- Students were randomly grouped with the following tasks: 1) Select one health care organization in the U.S.; 2) Conduct research on the selected health care organization; 3) Use Zoom to synchronize their research results as a team to the whole class.
- To increase the groups’ ease of communication, a Moodle discussion forum, and Zoom technology were made available to students. Students also elected to use other technology-mediated communication tools such as text messaging, Google Docs, and mobile device apps to collaborate on their group project.
- Following the completion of the group project, students were asked to assess their peers in the areas of project roles and responsibilities, contribution, timeliness of participation, collaboration, and professionalism.
- At the conclusion of the group project, students were asked to complete an anonymous self-reflection survey that contained open-ended questions such as, “What do you believe were the benefits of the group project?” and “What do you believe were the benefits of working as a group”. Three of the classes were also given 5 Likert-scale questions. The survey response was 87%.

Results

The student self-reflection survey showed the following results related to the group project:

- 91% of students agreed that it was useful for a future career in health care
- 92% of students agreed that it helped build collaboration skills
- 90% of students agreed that it helped to develop problem-solving skills
- 85% of students agreed that the project should be used in future courses
- 94% of students agreed that it was a positive learning experience

In the open-ended questions section of the survey, students commented that they gained the following from the group project:

- Knowledge of the U.S. health care system;
- Skills for better communication, teamwork, collaboration, and time management;
- Positive attitudes toward the challenge of working on a project as a team, learning from each other, respecting differences, and showing the appreciation of peers’ work; and
- Discovering methods of collaboration to achieve the project goals.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the success and benefits of including group research activities within a fully online course in order to teach teamwork and collaboration skills in team projects for our future generation of health care administrators and health/medical sciences majors.

- Through the group research project on selected health care organizations, students not only had a better understanding of the complex U.S. health care system, but also developed important skills in teamwork, collaboration, and problem solving.
- The knowledge and skills gained through the online group research project may help our students to be better prepared for future teamwork in a constantly changing U.S. health care system.

Implications

This research has significant implications for academic faculty in health care administration and health sciences:

- Teaching faculty will have a better understanding of the importance and potential opportunities for students to participate in teamwork and collaborate in an online learning environment.
- Although assigning students to conduct group research projects online may require more time and effort for faculty, positive outcomes can be obtained for student learning and teamwork building.
- Through purposeful course design and preparation, it is feasible to assign a group research project to online students.
- Teaching faculty are encouraged to assign more valuable group projects so that students not only gain knowledge on the course content, but also develop essential teamwork and collaboration skills to meet future challenges working in health care settings.

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References

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