

Focus Groups Reveal Dietetic Students' Opinions on the Addition of Cultural Competency Training to the Dietetics Curriculum

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Abstract

In order to better plan a curriculum for enhancing dietetic students cultural competence with the Hispanic population, focus groups were held with dietetic majors to better understand their thoughts and concerns regarding this proposed curricular change and to assess their understanding of cultural competence. Three focus groups (n=24) were conducted with dietetic students, on campus in a classroom setting. Students expressed a strong desire for additional coursework to improve cultural competency, requested specific classes, and provided reasons supporting this proposed program, and voiced concerns. One-half of the students reported, "not feeling comfortable" interacting with a Spanish-only speaking client. Reasons given for desiring this program included improved job success and the perceived ability to function more effectively in their future jobs. There was consensus that this curriculum not be mandatory, but remain optional. Concerns were voiced about workload, course availability, and availability of competent instructors. Only 33% of the students provided an accurate definition of cultural competence. Students recognized the need for this type of curricular change. Faculty should assess and then take student concerns into account as they develop curriculum to meet the future agricultural and nutrition education needs of an increasingly diverse U.S. population.

Introduction

As this country becomes ethnically diverse (Symens-Smith et al., 2000) it is not surprising that the fields of agriculture and dietetics call for embracing cultural competence and cultural sensitivity in their initial and ongoing training of students (Cotton et al., 2006; Smedley et al., 2002; Lopez, 2008; Talbert and Edwin, 2008). Cultural competency (CC) is defined as the ability to work effectively with individuals from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, or in a setting where several cultures coexist. It includes the ability to understand the language, culture and behavior of other individuals and groups and to make appropriate recommendations.

Moreover, it exists on a continuum from incompetence to proficiency (Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Cultural competency legislation such as the National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services in Health Care (CLAS) affecting the training of health care workers has been mandated in many states (Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) recommend that all college students become culturally proficient (AACU, 2005). Christiansen (2001) proposed that agricultural educators prepare students to deal appropriately with globalization and diversity.

To date, there are few published reports on the addition of a cultural component to the undergraduate dietetic curriculum (Short and Chittooran, 2004; Hansen-Petrik, 2005) and fewer that have sought student opinions in a group format on such curricular issues (Pecina, 2002; Palmer, 2008). One published study sought input for curricular review from medical students, but did not include cultural competency (Hendershott, 1993). Some attempts have been made by undergraduate dietetic programs and dietetic internship programs to integrate travel abroad study programs as a way of increasing cultural competency, but such pedagogical models can be costly and inconvenient to the student (Betterley, 2009; Anderson, 2005). Presently, agriculture and dietetic educators are contending with the need to add cultural competency training to their programs and are likewise experiencing a wide variation in the content and extent of cultural competency integrated into the curriculum (Lipson and Desantis, 2007; Donini-Lenhoof and Hedrick, 2009; Zeichner, 1995).

Calls for improving curricula to enhance cultural competency training and the fact that we are located in southern California which has a large Hispanic population, led us to consider adding an optional Spanish language and Hispanic/Latino culture tract into the dietetic curriculum.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to report student feedback and concerns regarding the initia-

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tion of a Hispanic-focused cultural competence curriculum tract, and report on student understanding of cultural competence.

Methods

The California State Polytechnic University Institutional Review Board approved this study. A convenience sample of currently enrolled Food and Nutrition majors with an option in Dietetics were recruited for the study via e-mail, faculty announcements in dietetic classes, and by word of mouth. Students received no compensation for their voluntary participation. Each student met individually with an author of their choosing to provide signed informed consent. After informed consent was obtained, demographic data were collected via written surveys. Participation inclusion criteria included being a dietetic major, being 18 years of age or older, and the ability to meet for one of three scheduled focus groups.

Three focus groups were held during the first week of June 2008 each with seven to nine participants. No additional groups were held because saturation (no new ideas given). A facilitator and co-facilitator (each author served once in each role) conducted the focus groups according to standard methods set forth by Krueger and Creswell (Krueger, 1994; Creswell, 1998). The facilitators received the same training together and opened with the same scripted welcome, introduction, rules, and procedures read by the facilitator. The co-facilitator audiotaped the proceedings, and a series of ten questions (Figure 1) was asked to ascertain student interest and opinions regarding the addition of Hispanic-focused dietetic training to the existing curriculum and their current understanding of cultural competency. The focus group process lasted between 45-60 minutes.

Qualitative raw data recorded on audiotapes were transcribed verbatim. Research team members reviewed transcribed data independently and identified themes using the constant comparative method, an analytic technique first described by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and later expanded on by Neuendorf (Neuendorf, 2002). After reading the students' responses to the questions, each facilitator proposed the themes that emerged. The facilitators then discussed those themes and agreed that four distinct themes (students wanting more CC classes, students wanting to encourage other students to take these CC classes, students wanting the curricular change as optional not mandatory and students concerns) emerged from the raw qualitative data (Figure 2).

The quantitative survey data was analyzed using Chi Square for comparison of sample ethnic backgrounds to the department population or the frequency procedure to determine percents of coded responses in SPSS version 16.0 (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL, 2008). Age-related correlations were performed for cultural competence, Spanish training and Spanish-speaking ability using in SPSS version 16.0 (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL, 2008).

1. What is your comfort level providing nutrition counseling to a Spanish-only speaker?
2. Are you interested in adding coursework to increase your comfort level with Spanish-only speakers?
3. For those with community experience, do you wish you had more skill in providing nutrition services in Spanish? Explain any experiences with this.
4. What do you know about cultural competency? Can you define it?
5. Do you think our Department should offer courses to improve students' ability to be culturally competent for the Hispanic community?
6. Would you be willing to add course units to improve cultural competency with the Hispanic culture?
7. Do you think your fellow classmates would be willing to add units to improve their cultural competency with the Hispanic culture?
8. Do you feel a curriculum like this would help you achieve cultural competency?
9. What would you say to other students about participation in such a program?
10. Do you have any additional thoughts on this subject that you would like to share?

Figure 1. Focus Group Questions.

Results and Discussion

The age, gender and ethnicity of this sample were representative of the department (not significantly different than the overall department as determined by Chi Square procedure in SPSS version 16.0, SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL, 2008). Sixteen percent of the department's dietetic students participated in the focus group. Participants were asked to report their previous Spanish language training or capacity (Table 1), and this information was collapsed into the following categories: none (no capability), high school training only, university and high school training, university training only and no formal training but fluent Spanish (learned at home).

Fourteen of the 24 students said that they did not feel comfortable counseling or performing a dieti-

Table 1. Descriptions and Characteristics of the Focus Group Sample (n=24)

	Focus group sample n = x (percent response)
Mean age	23.5 years (SD 4.74)
Age range	19-41 years
Males	2 (8.3%)
Females	22 (91.7%)
Self-reported Ethnicity	
White	9 (37.5%)
Hispanic	6 (25.0%)
Asian	9 (37.5%)
African American	0 (0%)
Academic level	Freshman 0 (0%) Sophomore 4 (16.7%) Junior 9 (37.5%) Senior 11 (45.8%)
Spanish capability	
None	7 (29.2%)
High School	6 (25.0%)
University and High school	2 (8.3%)
University only	4 (16.7%)
No formal training, but fluent	5 (21.0%)

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tian's duties in Spanish. The remaining 42% of the student subjects responded that they “feel comfortable” counseling in the Spanish language. Additionally, 75% (n= 18) of the students said that they had an interest in “adding coursework” to increase their comfort level with Spanish-only speakers. No students said that they “did not want this skill” and 38% of the students added that they “wished they had this skill.” In summary, approximately 60% of these students felt uncomfortable functioning in a Spanish only environment, and among this student sample there was an interest and desire to obtain a level of comfort in Spanish. Additional age-related analysis (Chi Square and correlation in SPSS version 16.0, SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL, 2008) determined that there were no correlations between age category (18-21, 22-25, 26-29, and 30+ years old), Spanish-speaking ability (P=0.126), ability to define cultural competence (P=0.672), or Spanish training (P=0.592) and responses to questions.

When asked to define/describe “cultural competency” only 38% correctly explained this concept, congruent with the definition (Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Three (13%) students said they “don't know” and 50% did not answer. For these mid to upper level Dietetic students, their knowledge of CC may or may not reflect on the actual CC of typical dietetic students; these students that volunteered for the focus group might represent a more culturally aware sub-group of students. Therefore, ongoing assessment of CC should be done with students both during and at the end of their program to determine their understanding of and capability to be CC. Additionally, outcomes research should be designed and conducted on the effectiveness of CC education and training since there currently are no standardized assessments on CC curricula (Anderson and Nesa, 2005; Stein, 2009). Our study simply determined if the students understood the definition of CC, whether the students had an interest to become more culturally

competent and if they have concerns about additional training in CC. The students reported definite and well-developed ideas on the types of courses they would like to add to their course load in order to increase their CC of the Hispanic/Latino culture. The following courses were suggested: Hispanic culture class (n=3), study abroad (n=3), counseling (n=5), Hispanic cooking (traditional and making healthier) (n=3), service learning and volunteer opportunities in the Hispanic community (n=1) and dietetic internship in Spanish language (n=2).

A total of 18/24 (75%) subjects reported that they felt this type of curriculum would help dietetic students achieve CC and six (25%) did not respond. When asked if they would encourage their classmates to enroll in this type of curriculum, 18 subjects said they would, one subject said they would not encourage other students, and five did not respond.

When asked to “provide any additional thoughts on this subject,” all students eagerly responded and

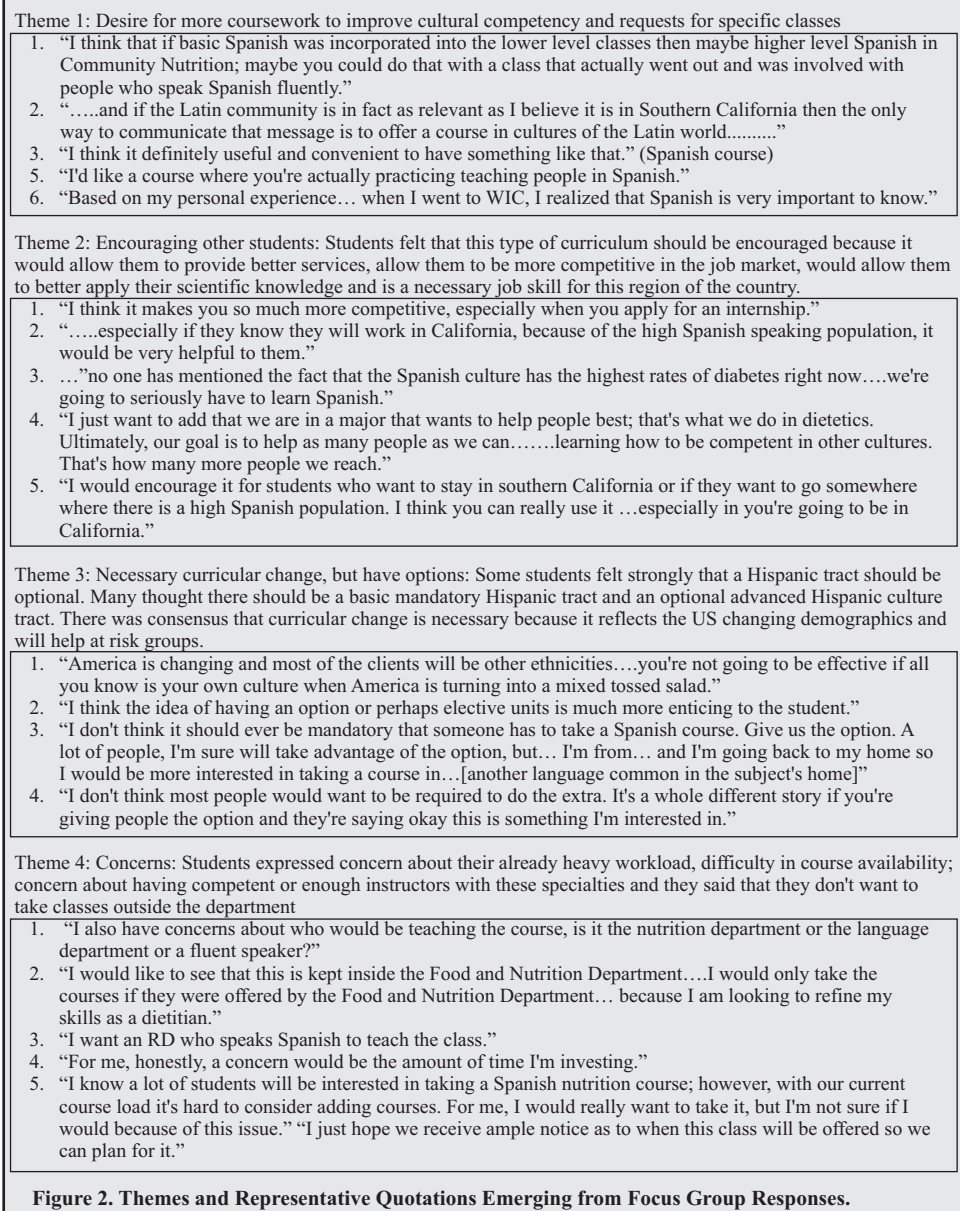


Figure 2. Themes and Representative Quotations Emerging from Focus Group Responses.

four themes emerged from their input. The first theme (Figure 2) was the students' desire and interest in coursework to improve their CC, and they suggested a variety of specific courses. The second theme to emerge was their desire to encourage other dietetic students to seek additional training in order to enhance CC. Students also commented on the value of CC in their future careers and believed that it would increase their ability to "better serve their clients." The third theme was that no student should be forced to take this new curricular track, but that this track should remain optional and elective (beyond the Commission on Accreditation for Dietetics Education requirements). Lastly, the students expressed numerous concerns and wanted the faculty to consider their workloads, and ensure the availability of the classes being taught by competent instructors.

This study had several limitations. The study had a small sample size, a typical limitation in qualitative focus groups. Although the questions asked were not theory driven, their validity was agreed upon by not only the three authors, but two additional professionals (a Ph.D. and a Masters R.D.) and a dietetic graduate student. It is not certain that the findings can be nationally generalized, as they are likely to be regionally specific. The findings may not represent all student opinions, especially those that did not participate or answer questions, but might likely represent those who feel particularly strong about the Hispanic culture or cultural diversity in general. It is possible that the focus group setting may have discouraged some of the subjects from speaking freely, or at all, especially if they had a dissenting opinion from the majority of the group. The largest numbers of students were senior-standing students (n=11), who will never participate in the proposed curriculum; however they are also the group of students that have the most experience with the present curriculum, therefore their input was particularly important. The authors were unable to pre-test the questions, because of the small population size, which may have compromised the ability to obtain a sample from the dietetic student population. Each facilitator made an effort to keep a pleasant and accepting atmosphere while encouraging participation of all focus group members by making eye contact with each member and looking around the room with interest. However, even though not all participants responded to all questions, all participants responded to some of the questions. The facilitators felt it inappropriate to require participants to respond, given that some of the participants were prior students of the facilitators, and could possibly contribute to a perceived power relationship difference. Additionally, since the focus groups were faculty facilitated, participant responses may have been inhibited or participants may have been more likely to respond positively due to the perceived power relationships between faculty and students.

Conclusions

When agriculture and dietetic educators develop new curriculum designed to increase cultural competence, they need to consider and address student concerns such as class overload and class availability, which may affect student's ability to graduate in a timely manner. They also need to ensure sufficient courses taught by well-trained professionals are offered and that faculty have cultural competency in one or more cultures. The students' concern over lack of faculty trained to teach Spanish nutrition is a legitimate one, the entire allied health care workforce, teachers of agriculture and the present field of dietetics is lacking in diversity (Camp et al., 2002; Donini-Lenhoff and Hedrick, 2002). Adding a CC curriculum may have an additional benefit by attracting underrepresented students to the dietetic and agricultural professions. The use of focus groups obtains meaningful student feedback (Rapp, 2006), and we suggest that Colleges of Agriculture and dietetic departments assess their students' perceived and real needs, using focus group feedback for the curriculum planning process.

These results indicate that students want to become more CC, and they recognize the value that CC adds to their ability to perform as a dietitian. Since 76% of the dietetic students in this program are non-Latino, and plan to practice in Latino communities, it is especially important for this and all dietetic programs to seriously address the issue of cultural competency in the dietetic curriculum while taking student needs into consideration.

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