

Service Learning at the University of Colorado School of Medicine: Highlighting Successful Service Learning with an Exemplar Community Based Organization

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Background

In August 2021, CUSOM introduced a service-learning curriculum (SLC) pairing medical students with community-based organizations (CBOs) for a community engagement experience (CEE). This curriculum included didactic components in the first year of medical school followed by hands-on involvement with assigned CBOs to foster community engagement, exploration, collaboration, and service. The SLC is an important part of the new TREK curriculum and aligns with the SOM's values of leadership, commitment, and curiosity,

Regrettably, due to feedback from medical students, faculty, and a change in the SLC's leadership, the program was suspended in July 2023. While many students had very positive experiences during the initial SLC iteration and still volunteer with their CBOs, some students expressed strong dissatisfaction. Common grievances included being placed with CBOs they weren't passionate about, scheduling conflicts with their rigid medical school commitments, unresponsive or seemingly misinformed CBOs, and being assigned roles that didn't offer meaningful community engagement.

Approach

Mental Health Community Engagement Program (MHCEP), founded in August 2020 by Jane Ewing with the support of CUSOM faculty member Janet Meredith, MBA, and four other medical students, stands out as an SLC success story. MHCEP aimed to better determine gaps and barriers faced by community members attempting to receive care, share their experiences, and implement solutions. MHCEP was a passion project started by students with an interest in engaging with, learning about, and serving community. Students were free to participate in accordance with their availability, ability, and interest, and students were encouraged to design projects, collaborate with one another, and work towards meaningful outcomes and deliverables.

Results

From its inception until now, MHCEP has conducted quantitative and qualitative research on public testimonials from the mental health community, held in-depth one-on-one interviews with community members, established a community advisory board, partnered with the local NAMI chapter, and integrated into the CUSOM SLC. Accomplishments include numerous poster presentations, a poster award, a published abstract, a manuscript recently submitted for publication, an oral presentation at a national conference, and funding awards.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the achievements of MHCEP, several improvements to the previous SLC iteration are suggested: (1) Empower students to choose their CBO or design their CEE, fostering autonomy and passion. (2) Replace inflexible hour requirements that clash with demanding academic schedules with competency and outcome-based metrics that students must display and produce as part of their projects.