

CONNECTING OLDER ADULTS WITH STUDENTS THROUGH INTERPROFESSIONAL TELECARE (COAST-IT): A PROGRAM EVALUATION.

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Abstract

Background: Given the growing older adult population, it is critical that future health care professionals are prepared to care for older adults. Student attitudes towards older adults and communication skills benefit from geriatric specific training. COAST-IT (Connecting Older Adults with Students Through Interprofessional Telecare) is a longitudinal program implemented across various health profession schools at an academic hospital system that focuses on providing students the opportunity to improve communication skills and attitudes towards older adults.

Methods: Older adults from various local community facilities were paired with students from pharmacy, nurse practitioner, dental, and medicine programs. Students made social phone calls every week to two weeks to their older adult partner (OAP). Students were surveyed before and after program participation about their attitudes towards older adult and self-perceived communication skills. The survey also included free text responses to assess knowledge and attitudes towards older adults. A chi-square test was used to evaluate for statistical significance between aggregate pre- and post-responses. In 2022, COAST-IT progressed to the use of the COCOA-24, a validated survey, to comprehensively evaluate the programs impact.

Results: 186 students responded to the initial survey. The percentage of students who ranked their confidence level as “very confident” increased from 18.4% to 31.1% and the percentage of students who ranked themselves as “not really confident” decreased from 7% to 0.5%. Data collection is ongoing on a semester basis, now with the COCOA-24 instrument.

Conclusions: Caring for the growing older adult population will require interprofessional teams that have well-developed communication skills and knowledge of the challenges older adults face. Many geriatric focused curriculum interventions are not longitudinal programs. The COAST-IT program provides students a way to practice building longitudinal relationships that improve attitudes toward older adults and build communication skills with real patients in their preclinical years. For future considerations, program evaluation can extend to evaluating the impact that COAST-IT has on the OAP regarding loneliness and perceived social isolation.