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Effects of Educating URI General Education Students on Physical Activity, Exercise, and Chronic Disease Prevention and Management

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Honors Project Reflection

While studying Kinesiology for the past four years I have learned how important it is to make physical activity an essential part of an individual's lifestyle. Since chronic diseases are the leading cause of death and disability in the United States and personally having risk factors for certain diseases, I have implemented these practices into my own life. I have also always been passionate about helping others incorporate physical activity into their lives even if it's in the smallest way. Therefore, when Dr. Ward-Ritacco suggested I help her with the "Exercise is Medicine" course and use her students as subjects for my project I couldn't resist. Dr. Ward-Ritacco and I decided to evaluate self-reported physical activity levels, reasons for exercise, and knowledge of chronic disease risk factors among the undergraduate students enrolled in this course.

Since I have limited experience with running my own research study I tried to keep the material simple and easy to understand/fill out so I used questioners to gather my information. I had students answer questionnaires during the first (PRE) and the second half of the semester (POST) including, the Godin Physical Activity Questionnaire (Godin), International Physical Activity Question (IPAQ), and the Reasons for Exercise Inventory (REI). I was not surprised to see that informing students on the importance of physical activity and the role it plays in chronic disease prevention and management positively impacted their reasons for exercising and being physically active, but I was surprised that there was not a concomitant increase in physical activity levels from PRE-to-POST. This outcome could be due to the limited sample size that we had or because of the way students interpreted the instructions for the self-reported questionnaire.

I also observed differences in attitudes from the students towards participating in the study over the course of the semester. For the PRE-questionnaires, students were asked to fill out the questionnaires on their own and bring the completed packets to class. This was also used as an assignment for the class so they received credit for doing it. When asked to complete the POST questionnaires students were given time in class and seemed less motivated to fill them out because they were not receiving class credit for finishing them. If I were to do this again, I would have used the same method when administering both PRE and POST questionnaires.

This general education class exposed non-kinesiology majors to the role of physical activity in achieving and maintaining an optimal level of health and wellness. One challenge that Dr. Ward-Ritacco, the other TA, and I found was that the students had less background knowledge than we thought they would coming into the class and they experienced trouble with many of the class concepts. This could be because we have a kinesiology background and a passion for the information being taught or because the students were just not as interested in the material as we thought they would be. The struggles that we felt when trying to change the approach for teaching the course information could relate to the same challenges doctors face when trying to educate patients on the importance of exercise in the prevention and management of chronic diseases.

One of my favorite parts of my Honors Project was calculating the results of the questionnaires. It was interesting to see how subject's answers and behaviors changed throughout the course of the semester. This experience as a whole gave me a greater appreciation for human subject research and made me realize the time and effort that goes into even the most basic studies.

I believe the Honors Project was one of the most significant experiences that I have had at the University of Rhode Island. While this was not a complex study, it did require a noteworthy amount of time, a lot of effort, and endless support from my advisor. Being able to learn from one of my mentors was an influential and amazing opportunity. I was able to learn so much and this was great involvement to add to my resume. I believe that this project helped me secure a job working in an obesity clinic after graduation and I will hopefully be able to apply the skills I learned about chronic disease prevention and maintenance to my future endeavors and make an impact on other individuals.