

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

A study abroad program for Korean nursing students in the San Francisco Bay Area: A SWOT analysis

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ABSTRACT

Education in transcultural nursing care helps undergraduate nursing students develop an awareness of global health problems and improve their competency in providing nursing care to patients from diverse cultural backgrounds. For this reason, a summer study abroad program was developed for Korean undergraduate nursing students to expand their knowledge of and competency in culturally sensitive nursing care. For three consecutive years, different groups of Korean nursing students were sent to a host university in the San Francisco Bay Area to learn about health care systems and the roles of nurses in the United States. In all, 13 students participated in the program. A SWOT analysis was employed to evaluate the effectiveness of the study abroad program. For an international nursing program to be successful, it must be well-designed. Factors that affect such programs should be thoroughly investigated and, when necessary, should be revised or expanded based on the results obtained.

Key Words: Korean, Nursing education, Nursing students, Transcultural nursing

1. INTRODUCTION

South Korea has been a traditionally homogeneous society, but an economic surge has fueled an influx of many international visitors. In 2014, according to the Korea Immigration Service, international visitors numbered 12.7 million and foreign residents 1.7 million,^[1] which is approximately 3% of the total Korean population. Accordingly, Korean health care professionals are seeing more foreign patients than in the past. The Korean Health Industry Development Institute reported that the number of foreign patients increased rapidly from 7,900 in 2007 to 210,000 in 2013.^[2]

Despite the rapidly increasing number of foreign patients, Korean nurses have limited experience with people from varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds, whether at home, in schools,

or hospitals. This limited experience may reflect a lack of competency in transcultural nursing care. Researchers who have explored the transcultural competency of Korean nursing students have found that they have low cultural awareness, attitudes, perception, and self-efficacy.^[3,4]

The insufficient competency of health care providers in transcultural care is directly related to low patient satisfaction and negative health outcomes.^[5] This may stem from miscommunication with patients or misunderstanding the common health problems of culturally diverse patients. Recent research has found that the quality of communication between physicians and patients can be hindered by miscommunication that arises from differences in perspectives, values, and beliefs about health and illness.^[6] According to Campbell,^[7]

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Korean students in an RN to BSN (registered nurse to a bachelor of science in nursing) program in the United States had difficulty communicating with patients and were less familiar with culturally related health conditions, such as obesity and sickle cell disease, and the meaning of illnesses in patients' lives.

Recently efforts have been initiated to improve the transcultural nursing competency of Korean nursing students but most of those efforts have involved the development of courses in transcultural nursing care.^[3,8] However, real experience with culturally different patients provides students with valuable opportunities to practice transcultural nursing care directly. Oh, Lee, and Schepp^[4] have observed that travel abroad and interaction with foreigners were associated with cultural awareness among Korean nursing students.

Previous studies of study abroad programs have involved mostly students from North American and European countries traveling to underdeveloped countries for public health nursing.^[9,10] While such international practicum may provide valuable educational opportunities, we have noticed that our Korean students have learning needs unique to developed countries. These students can be exposed to acutely ill patients from diverse backgrounds in hospital settings and work with clinicians who are familiar with transcultural medical and nursing care.

Thus, our transcultural study-abroad program was designed to take advantage of in-patient learning experience in an urban setting in the United States. The final course provided students with integrated experiences that involved lectures, skills and simulation laboratory, clinical observation, site visits, and cultural experiences. This type of enriched program may provide nursing students with the optimal and efficient opportunity to nurture transcultural competency.^[11,12] The San Francisco Bay Area was selected because it is well-known for its cultural diversity and longstanding professional partnerships with the authors; the latter was critically important in establishing and maintaining the continuous communication required to develop and manage this program. The program was supported by an Innovative University Education Grant from the Korean Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and operated for 3 years (2009 – 2011). The purpose of this paper was to describe and analyze the authors' experiences and program outcomes using a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis.

2. METHOD

This descriptive study used SWOT analysis to evaluate a study abroad program for Korean undergraduate nursing students. Data were collected from September 2009 to September

2011.

2.1 Measurements

Students and faculty were asked to answer open-ended questions on the strengths and weaknesses of the program. They were also invited to identify components outside of the program that might be helpful (opportunities) or hindering (threats) to a successful program.

2.2 Data collection

SWOT analysis was based on qualitative data that were derived from meetings, interviews, essays, and email communications with the program's 13 nursing students and four faculty members.

2.3 Program development and contents

A general description of the program and its components is presented in Tables 1 and 2. Four faculty and two coordinators from one Korean university and two host universities in the U.S. were primarily responsible for developing and operating the program. Initially, faculty at the visiting university submitted a program proposal to the hosting universities that included the program's purpose, contents, and resources. Faculty of hosting schools reviewed the program and agreed to arrange visits to their schools and classes and clinical observation. The Korean faculty also used their personal and professional networks when contacting the institutions and hospitals that students would visit. Detailed plans were discussed by email and telephone between Incheon and San Francisco.

After program planning had been completed, third year nursing students who had completed one clinical semester in the 4-year nursing program were recruited to participate in the study abroad program. Students were knowledgeable about nursing topics and familiar with clinical environments. In addition to having successfully complete one clinical semester, selected candidates had a grade point average of 3.5 or higher on a 4.5 scale, were fluent in English and successfully completed an interview conducted in English. Students also completed a criminal background check, health examination and selected vaccinations as specified by the host university.

The course objectives were to achieve an understanding of the U.S. health care system and the roles of nurses, to compare this knowledge with the Korean experience, and to increase competency in culturally sensitive nursing care. The program consisted of five components: a preparatory session, lectures, a practicum, institutional visits, and cultural experiences. The preparatory session, which consisted of seminars and skills and physical examination laboratories,

was held in Korea before students left for San Francisco. The program was conducted as a two-unit summer program and required 96 hours in total. Students were graded as “pass” or “fail” based on successfully passing an examination over the content included in the preparatory session, active participation during the program, and a final paper about their experiences.

During the preparatory session, students were informed, in English, about the course, the U.S. health care system, nurs-

ing roles, communication skills, and documentation of the U.S. nursing care plan. The orientation occurred in the hosting university. Specific content included regulations of the U.S. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA), blood borne pathogens, and abuse of older adults, which were requirements for the host university nursing program. Faculty reviewed with students how to perform a head-to-toe health assessment and how to communicate with staff and patients in English.

Table 1. Description of the Korean study abroad program

<p>Period: 2 weeks</p> <p>Credit: Two units, summer clinical practicum at the visiting university.</p> <p>Grant source: Innovative University Education of Korean Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.</p> <p>Requirements for enrollment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Grade point average higher than 3.5/4.5. - Good English proficiency (prefer fair test scores from the Test of English for International Communication and Test of English as a Foreign Language). - Good evaluation following interview in English. - Vaccination history of measles, mumps, rubella and hepatitis B, tuberculin skin test. - Criminal background report. <p>Course objectives:</p> <p>Knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand culturally sensitive nursing care and express this understanding in a clinical setting. - Understand the U.S. health and nursing care systems, the roles of nurses, and differences between the U.S. and Korean health care systems. - Understand nursing care plans of patients with diverse cultural backgrounds. <p>Performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Effectively use therapeutic communication with patients taking into account safety and physiologic, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual needs. - Perform basic physical assessments on assigned patients. - Display professional communication skills with health care professionals. - Be professional during interactions with patients, families, and health care professionals. - Prepare equipment, maintain clean/aseptic techniques, and perform skills efficiently in a skills laboratory. - Perform interviews, physical examinations, basic nursing skills and use critical thinking to solve problems as presented in simulation scenarios. - Participate in a debriefing session to analyze scenarios and improve critical thinking.
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The practicum included basic life support (BLS) training, a basic nursing skills laboratory and simulation laboratory, and clinical observation in hospital outpatient and inpatient units. After students obtained BLS certification, they could participate in clinical observation. In the nursing skills laboratory, students were introduced to beginning nursing skills (*e.g.*, head-to-toe assessment, medication administration). Students also participated in simulation sessions with a sepsis case. For clinical observation, students visited an oncology infusion center, emergency department, intensive care, maternity, neonatal care, transitional care and medical surgical

units as well as a care home for older adults. Their main assignments were taking patient histories, performing physical examinations, taking vital signs, health education, and observing nursing practices. All activities were conducted under the direct supervision of staff nurses faculty members of the hosting university. For safety reasons, no visit involved invasive nursing care or medication administration. On completion of the clinical observation, students attended seminars with the faculty members of the hosting university to discuss health care and the differences and similarities between Korean and American nursing environments.

Table 2. Components of the Korean study abroad program

<p>Session 1: Preparatory Session in Korea</p> <p>Seminars</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Course orientation. - Lecture and discussion on the U.S. health care system. - Nursing roles and communication skills. <p>Online lecture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nursing care plan and documentation. <p>Laboratories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Head-to-toe physical examination. - Transferring patients. - Medication administration. - Wound care with simple dressing. <p>Session 2: Practicum</p> <p>Orientation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Video on blood borne pathogens, HIPPA regulations, abuse of older adults. - Information about clinical sites. <p>Laboratories: Nursing skills and physical assessment</p> <p>Simulation</p> <p>Clinical observation</p> <p>Postpracticum seminar</p> <p>Lecture and practice to obtain BLS certification</p> <p>Session 3: Site Visits</p> <p>School of nursing and school of public health in universities.</p> <p>Community health clinic.</p> <p>Senior housing facility.</p> <p>Pharmacies.</p> <p>Session 4: Cultural Experience</p> <p>Volunteer in AIDS walk.</p> <p>Tours of local attractions.</p> <p>Appreciation luncheon.</p>
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Note. HIPPA = Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act; AIDS = acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

Visits to various institutions and cultural exposure provided students with diverse experiences. They visited two nursing schools, one school of public health, two university hospitals, a senior housing facility, and local pharmacies. For the cultural experience, students participated as volunteers in the AIDS Walk in San Francisco and had the opportunity to tour local attractions. On the final day, the Korean students hosted a lunch for the staff of host facilities to express their appreciation to those who helped them during the summer program.

2.4 Analysis

SWOT analysis was created in the 1950s at the Harvard Business School to provide a process to analyze case studies. It was subsequently adopted widely as a business tool^[13] and allowed institutions to better position and improve pro-

grams. Strengths and weaknesses reflect internal competencies and resources that institutions or individuals possess. Opportunities and threats are external factors that might affect programs; they could be individuals, resources, circumstances, trends, or events with positive or negative consequences. SWOT analysis can also help nursing educators bolster strengths, take advantage of opportunities, overcome threats, and minimize the weaknesses of educational programs.^[14]

3. RESULTS

3.1 Strengths

The most frequently reported strength of our study abroad program was the integrated educational experiences that included language learning, transcultural experiences, and evidence-based nursing care. Students were able to interact

with local faculty, students, nurses, physicians, and patients in various environments such as lectures, nursing skills laboratories, and clinical observations. Students and faculty commented that this integrated learning opportunity provided lived experiences of nursing education environments and clinical settings in the United States. The most frequently reported experiences involved communication style, classroom atmosphere, and equipment and health care services performed by multidisciplinary team in hospitals.

Other notable strengths of the program were the bilingual and bicultural capabilities of local faculty. Because local faculty were familiar with both the Korean and American health care systems, they could articulate how health care providers worked differently or similarly in both countries. They also facilitated student interaction with other local nursing faculty, nurses, other health care providers, local students, and patients. In this environment, the Korean students felt less stress and concern about misunderstandings caused by language or cultural differences.

Other strengths included the informative preparatory session and obtaining BLS certification, which were helpful from individual and program perspectives. In addition, the Korean students reported that receiving two units of credit from their university and a fee waiver were definite program strengths.

3.2 Weaknesses

According to students and faculty, the most glaring program weaknesses were its short length and high cost. Students felt that 2 weeks was not enough time to meet some of the course objectives. Although the Korean government provided \$2,000 per student, those funds were dedicated to program expenses. Students had to finance their flights, lodging outside of the host nursing school, and food. Students were satisfied with their accommodations but wanted to use the school library to prepare for the practicum and seminars while they were staying inside of the school.

Lack of direct patient care was cited as another significant weakness. Because the program was short and students were not registered as full-time students of the local nursing school, they were unable to obtain official credits or benefits from the host school, which included malpractice insurance. As a result, students had limited access to patient information and nursing care, which was understandable for patient safety and confidentiality.

3.3 Opportunities

Students and faculty reported that the program's most significant opportunities were the grant from the Korean government and the commitment of the visiting school. The government grant was mainly used to cover the direct costs

of program development and operation. The visiting school also supported the program indirectly by giving course credits, a tuition waiver, and health insurance to students. Another opportunity was the well-established understanding of the importance of culturally competent nursing care within universities, hospitals, and community in both regions. Faculty and staff in the San Francisco Bay Area truly welcomed students and provided a variety of learning opportunities despite a lack of time, personnel, and resources. The summer break, the time period allocated for the program, allowed students, faculty, and staff to concentrate on the program without the burden of duties associated with regular semesters.

3.4 Threats

Students and faculty reported the major threats to this program were insufficient language skills and cultural differences between local faculty and students. Even though students had passed a written examination and were interviewed before enrollment in the program, their language skills were too rudimentary for them to express their thoughts during program activities. Students reported that they could understand reading material, quizzes, and lectures, but they were unable to fully articulate their thoughts during classroom discussions.

Students and faculty often encountered awkward situations in the classroom and clinical settings. For example, the Korean students tried to show their respect for faculty and staff by not asking too many questions or by avoiding eye contact. In the West, however, these behaviors can be considered lack of interest or disrespect.

4. DISCUSSION

The authors conducted SWOT analysis to describe the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to a short-term study abroad program for Korean nursing students. The students and faculty who participated in this program reported that it provided excellent opportunities to learn culturally sensitive health issues and transcultural nursing care using safe, practical, and integrated methods. All of the students met the course objectives, passed course requirements (e.g., BLS certification, quizzes), and participated in all classes, laboratories, and clinical observations. In seminars, the students expressed a sound understanding of the health care system and nursing roles in the United States, as compared with the Korean system. They also stated that they had become more competent in providing culturally sensitive nursing care to patients. These perceived benefits are consistent with the literature. Previous studies have indicated that study abroad programs for undergraduate nursing students provide obvious benefits to students, schools, and commu-

nities.^[15] In addition, the intercultural experience provides students with broader educational benefits: cognitive development, professional development, personal maturation, and increased cultural understanding.^[16]

However, the program's short length and high cost should be overcome to continue this type of program. Afriyie Asenso and their colleagues^[17] found that Canadian nursing students experienced three stages of learning during their 3-week study abroad in Zambia. At the outset, students needed time to adjust to the local environment; next they started to engage in learning activities; finally they started critical thinking, which led to more significant learning experiences. Our 2-week model might not have afforded enough time for the development of these valuable stages. In addition, our program's high cost was a significant weakness. The literature has described most study abroad programs as moving students from developed to developing countries. In such cases, cost might be a less important issue because living costs in developing countries are usually low. However, sending students from developing countries to developed countries poses obvious financial concern. Kent-Wilkinson and colleagues^[15] found that financial burden was one of the most significant barriers for their study abroad program. In developing and operating our program, we found that potential funding for educators is currently available from the Ministry of Education, the Korean International Cooperation Agency, the Overseas Korean Nurses Association, the Ko-

rean University Council for Social Services, and others. In addition, educators should not overlook the availability of support from their own universities. For example, most universities have international offices dedicated to establishing international partnerships and have staff, space, and experience with international institutions. They often encourage the overseas involvement of their students and faculty.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study abroad program provided an opportunity for Korean undergraduate nursing students to learn about transcultural nursing care for patients from diverse cultural backgrounds, within different health care systems, and the roles of health care providers in the United States in a relatively short time. Although the program's benefits were many, the language barrier, high cost, and cultural barriers in the learning environment were weaknesses to be overcome if future program are to be successful. Nursing educators worldwide may need to establish a consortium for study abroad programs to share placements, strategies, and funding resources.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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