

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Community champions: A mixed methods study on volunteer recruitment and retention in community engagement

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## ABSTRACT

Community engagement is an effective method of preparing nursing students to be influential providers for diverse patient populations. Over the course of the 2016-2017 academic year, volunteer attendance was recorded and a qualitative survey was distributed to evaluate attendance rates and retention of Community Champion volunteers, and to determine factors that contributed to the success and sustainability of the program. There was an 83% attendance rate overall at the community-based initiatives, with the highest attendance rate of 98% amongst initiative leaders. The following themes emerged from the qualitative surveys assessing retention: 1) Self motivation and enthusiasm among community members 2) diverse and interdisciplinary interactions 3) communication and organization and 4) student commitment barriers. Students with the greatest amount of experience with community engagement assumed more responsibility and dedicated the most amount of time to the program. The consistent commitment of volunteers to Community Champions has positively impacted the students' academic careers and the sustainability of the community partnership. In order to optimize community programming, volunteer reliability, consistency and commitment are necessary.

**Key Words:** Community engagement, Volunteer recruitment, Volunteer retention, Service learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nurses are challenged with addressing the increasingly complex healthcare needs of racially and culturally diverse societies. Communities encounter social, economic and cultural implications that affect their health. In many communities, these conditions often lead to comorbidities such as asthma, obesity, mental health diseases and substance abuse.<sup>[1]</sup> In order to meet the demands of patients, nurses must address the social determinants of health. Community engagement is an effective method for preparing nursing students to be influen-

tial healthcare providers for diverse patient populations. Also referred to as community based learning or service learning, community engagement is the collaboration between higher learning institutions and their surrounding communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources through partnerships.<sup>[2]</sup> Community engagement provides the opportunity for students to learn beyond the confines of a classroom by immersing in the surrounding community. Research suggests that such experiences have positive influences for student retention and success in addition to

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students' understanding of the academic content.<sup>[3]</sup> Community engagement increases the ability to apply classroom knowledge to real-world problems, and improves critical thinking skills.<sup>[3]</sup> It also increases self-efficacy and builds inter-cultural understanding, communication and leadership skills.<sup>[3]</sup>

College students often seek opportunities for fulfillment, personal growth and service through community engagement. While there are many college students interested in community service, students who have volunteered in high school are most likely to volunteer in college.<sup>[4]</sup> The following were identified as characteristics that increase the likelihood of volunteering: non-traditional age of students, females, African American/Asian or Latino ethnicity, at least one parent with a bachelor's degree, full-time students, education, and science or professional occupation major.<sup>[5]</sup> Students' motivations for volunteering included helping others and the satisfaction derived from helping,<sup>[6]</sup> developing new skills, and networking for the purposes of career development.<sup>[7]</sup> Students who participate in community service in college have shown a stronger belief that they could make a difference, a greater value of service and a commitment to future volunteer service.<sup>[8]</sup> Studies have also shown that community engagement as an undergraduate student has influenced students' plans to become involved in service-related careers.<sup>[9]</sup> Furthermore, the students who volunteered not only enhanced their academic education but also "acquired knowledge about local and national politics, developed an appreciation of the diverse backgrounds and characteristics of community recipients, and increased their confidence in their ability to make a difference in the community".<sup>[3]</sup>

More than 1,100 postsecondary institutions are members of Campus Compact, a national organization of college and university presidents committed to community service, civic engagement and service learning in higher education.<sup>[10]</sup> Service learning and community partnerships are distinguished from other forms of experiential learning such as volunteering by their intention to benefit students and recipients of service equally.<sup>[11]</sup> In order to create effective programming, many urban research universities dedicate substantial resources to support student involvement in service throughout surrounding communities. In 2016, the National Science Foundation incentivized principal investigators and research institutions to further evaluate their community learning programs and disseminate the findings.<sup>[12]</sup> By further analyzing the impact and effectiveness of the community programming, a more strategic approach could be implemented to continue to improve community outcomes and to build community partnerships.

## Program overview

At the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, Community Champions is comprised of a group of nursing students who volunteer to devote their time and knowledge to the community through twelve community-based intergenerational initiatives that span across Philadelphia. Developed in 2014, Community Champions involves community partners, faculty members, and undergraduate volunteers to strategically develop programs that are mutually beneficial to the community members as well as to the Community Champions volunteers.<sup>[13]</sup> Rooted in the Community-As-Partner theoretical framework, nursing students and leaders partnered with the community to identify goals and ideals while addressing barriers and deficiencies. Nursing students utilized the nursing assessment to guide the development of the health initiatives.<sup>[14]</sup> The initiatives included after school health classes in Philadelphia public schools, dance classes for community members of all ages, and support of women post-incarceration in recovery among others. Many of the original community sites for the Community Champion initiatives have had a long-standing partnership with the University that presented a need for student-led health programming.

Each initiative had a designated student leader and faculty member that provided mentorship to the student volunteers, shared academic and clinical expertise, and oversaw all program content. The student leaders were selected nursing student volunteers who demonstrated leadership capabilities and enthusiasm for Community Champions. The student leader was responsible for preparing the educational content for each session based on the needs of community members they worked with. Student leaders were responsible for organizing initiative logistics, such as transportation and oversight of other student volunteers. Each student volunteer participated in the planning of the curricula and assumed a role in facilitating the weekly initiative. Student volunteers were required to communicate with their student leader to maintain accountability.

Each year, Community Champions aimed to expand student participation and impact on the community. While retaining past volunteers, Community Champions developed recruitment efforts at the beginning of each semester. Success and sustainability of a community-based initiative is dependent on effective strategies for recruiting student volunteers and retaining student volunteers throughout the initiatives.

Opportunities to volunteer with Community Champions were promoted through emails and Facebook notices, extracurricular activity fairs, and through class announcements during the first five minutes of class periods during the first week of

each semester. Community Champion student leaders identified particular classes that targeted students with flexible schedules and curricula that focused on population health. In 2016, freshmen classes received the greatest number of announcements to increase the new students' exposure to Community Champions, and because freshmen students have the most time available for extracurricular activity. Students who were enrolled in classes that studied health disparities were also visited and emailed at the beginning of the semester to encourage participation in Community Champions. These elective classes were targeted because the course content aligned most closely with the mission of Community Champions. Students who demonstrated interest at the recruitment events participated in two additional information sessions with the aim of outlining the initiative plans for the semester as well as forging a commitment with the interested student volunteers. Community Champions strived to build its membership from those who are willing to commit to attending the weekly sessions in order to maintain continuity and progress throughout the semester. Each student initiative leader defined the attendance policy that accepted justifiable absences with advance notice. In addition to engaging in one specific initiative, the Community Champions students were also expected to attend the monthly general body meeting.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Demographics and sample

Demographic characteristics for the students in the Community Champions program were collected through review of program records. For the sample of students included in attendance, the process of tracking attendance for each initiative relied on the student leaders of the initiative and the student directors of Community Champions. The student initiative leaders sent weekly updates, including attendance, to the student directors. The student directors kept an updated excel spreadsheet to track the student attendance of each initiative, as well as at the monthly meetings. For the sample of students who completed surveys, students in Community Champions were recruited to complete the survey in person and via email at a monthly Community Champions meeting at the end of the semester. The surveys were initially handed out to students at the monthly general body meeting in December 2016 and 12 students completed at the end of the meeting. A follow up email was sent to the listserv to give those not in attendance at the meeting an opportunity to participate.

### 2.2 Data collection

Retention data were collected from November 2016 to January 2017 through survey questions using a Likert scale and open-ended questions. Students in attendance at the Decem-

ber monthly meeting were provided the questionnaire. The eight survey questions were developed from data collection measures used in similar studies and prior work with this population.<sup>[13,15]</sup> Likert scale surveys were administered to the Community Champions to evaluate their perceptions related to retention in the program, and their interest and satisfaction of the initiatives. Students were also asked to complete three open-ended questions regarding their experience in Community Champions, barriers they experienced and how the program could be improved. The open-ended questions were constructed based on themes from previous findings with former Community Champions and discussions with content experts.<sup>[13]</sup> Only students who completed the entire form including the likert scale and all open-ended questions were included in the analysis. The respondents completed the survey questions by paper and submitted the forms to the student directors.

### 2.3 Data analysis

Frequencies were computed to analyze the quantitative attendance and retention survey data. The attendance rate of each initiative was compared to one another and the retention of the student volunteers were evaluated. The qualitative retention survey data were analyzed based on a thematic review of the data by two authors (J.F., C.B) to discover emerging patterns among the data. Each author individually read and coded the survey responses. The authors then discussed the codes to develop themes. The authors returned to the data to confirm the codes, then presented finalized themes.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Demographics and sample results

Forty-nine student nurses enrolled in Community Champions and attended weekly community initiatives. Students ranged from freshman to senior. Non-traditional, second degree students were also included. Table 1 depicts the breakdown of students involved by year. Students participated in Community Champions for a duration of 0 to 3 years ( $m = 1$ ). The level of experience in community service ranged from less than one year to more than 4 years. All Community Champions members indicated some exposure to and an interest in community service. The most experienced members had previous leadership positions based in community outreach. Community Champions students ranged in age from 18 to 41 years and the majority of members were female. Students with the most amount of experience of community service were the students who assumed more responsibility and dedicated the most amount of time to the program.

**Table 1.** Demographic class year data of community champions from 2016-2017

Class Year	Number of Students Involved	Percentage of Students Involved
Senior	11	22%
Junior	11	22%
Sophomore	16	34%
Freshman	5	10%
Second-degree	6	12%

A subgroup of 12 students from Community Champions completed the qualitative survey. Out of the 12 students who participated in the surveys, two were freshmen, three were

sophomores, three were juniors, and four were seniors.

**3.2 Attendance results**

The Community Champions initiatives had consistently high attendance rates amongst student volunteers. The majority of student volunteers in Community Champions attended the events every week. On average, initiatives had an 82.7% attendance rate. Table 2 represents the number of expected student volunteers that attended events weekly; the initiative leaders had the highest attendance rate. The leaders' attendance rate was over 98%, and the instances when a leader was not present, the absence was effectively communicated to the volunteer group and responsibilities of the leader were delegated to other volunteers for the week.

**Table 2.** The number of student volunteers that attended each initiative weekly

Community Champions Initiative	Total Number of Student Volunteers	Weekly Median of Student Volunteers	Weekly Mean of Student Volunteers
After School Health Science Class	4	2 (50%)	2.3 (57.5%)
School Based Health Class	4	3 (75%)	3.6 (90%)
Library Partnership	4	2 (50%)	2 (50%)
Student Mentorship	4	3.5 (87.5%)	3.5 (87.5%)
Partnership with Women's Half Way House	3	3 (100%)	3 (100%)
After School Mentoring	6	6 (100%)	6 (100%)
Infant Safety Outreach	7 [2]	2 (28.6%) [100%]	2 (28.6%) [100%]
Athletic Mentorship	1	1 (100%)	0.9 (90%)
Elder Dance Health Class	4	3 (75%)	3.1 (77.5%)
Community Dance Health Class	3	3 (100%)	2.75 (91.7%)
Elementary School Dance Health Class	3	3 (100%)	2.6 (86.7%)
Elder Dance Health Class II	5	4 (80%)	4.1 (82%)

**3.3 Retention survey quantitative results**

Survey data indicated that 92% students cited their experience in Community Champions was very valuable. Furthermore, 92% of Community Champion volunteers want to continue participating in their initiative and 100% would recommend it to a friend.

**3.4 Retention survey qualitative results**

**3.4.1 Self-motivation and enthusiasm**

Students in Community Champions had a positive experience with the initiatives because the community members who attended the events were enthusiastic and self-motivated. One of the Community Champions students that volunteers in a classroom shared that "I love the [middle school community members] and their willingness to learn about important health-related topics." A study explained the experience was "extremely gratifying to know that I get to help young students in the community live healthier lives." Another Com-

munity Champion student stated the community members "love to talk to us about healthy lifestyle choices" and "their love for this program makes it a wonderful experience."

**3.4.2 Interactions with diverse community members and interdisciplinary students**

Diversity of both the community members and the students enhanced community programming. Students often found themselves learning from their peers and from the community members, and explained that they enjoyed interacting with the community members of all ages. Students also appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with an interdisciplinary student team of medical students, nursing students, and nurse practitioner students. The generational, socioeconomic, educational and cultural diversity provided the opportunity to engage and form bonds with community members who do not share the students' lived environment. One student cited the "variety of people" to be one of the most valuable as-

pects to the program. Students explained how this exposure to diverse communities helped them better care for varied populations.

### 3.4.3 Importance of communication and organization

The Community Champion students emphasized the importance of maintaining essential communication and organization in order to have successful community engagement programming. While there was often a great deal of initial interest from both the community and students, consistent schedules and expectations needed to be communicated in order to gain commitment from both community sites and student volunteers. One student initially found it difficult to implement the health curriculum because the elementary school did not have a “set group of kids we would have to work with.” Students stated that a continued emphasis on consistency within both Community Champions and community sites would strengthen the program.

### 3.4.4 Student commitment barriers

A large part of the success of community programming is consistency and sustainability. One barrier that Community Champions have encountered were the competing priorities of education and employment commitments. Community Champion students expressed having significant time constraints due to rigid class schedules. One Community Champion student explained that it would be helpful to have “more flexibility on scheduling [community initiatives] because I ended up having class really close to the time of the library partnership initiative.” Another student suggested more feasible and compensated transportation options. Students expressed that having a steadier commitment among membership would make it easier to collaborate and establish lesson plans and initiative structure.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The mutual investment from both the community members and the Community Champions students contributed to the success of the program and the shared sense of community at the initiatives. Previous studies showed service participation in college had significantly positive influences on academic performance, commitment to activism, leadership and plans to participate in service after college.<sup>[16]</sup> All volunteers had the opportunity to improve leadership skills by participating in Community Champions, and Community Champions initiative leaders demonstrated commitment to the program at a higher rate of 98% than the overall Community Champions volunteers at 83%. Qualitative data from a similar study demonstrated that service learning was effective, in part, because it facilitated an increased sense of personal efficacy, an increased awareness of the surrounding community, an increased awareness of one’s personal values, and increased

engagement in the classroom.<sup>[16]</sup>

To continue to improve participation in the programs and optimize the impact of initiatives, “successful efforts should have a research foundation and an emphasis on accountability from the beginning”.<sup>[12]</sup> It is important to initially identify the research implications. In a study to develop an accountability system to broaden participation in STEM classes, Harkavy found that “multidimensional metrics, both quantitative and qualitative, are needed to ensure understanding and meaning beyond metrics alone”.<sup>[12]</sup> In this Community Champions study, the attendance frequencies provided baseline data, and the qualitative data clarified why the attendance rates were consistently high. The surveys provided more insight into what motivates volunteers to attend and how volunteers choose commitments among competing priorities. The qualitative surveys also highlighted some of the recurring barriers, such as the longer distance from the school campus, and unclear plans and expectations of the students at beginning of the semester. Similarly, the STEM study found that “evaluation should guide the evolution of programs and projects” and that “evaluation benefits from participatory methods that engage the groups affected, that involve learning from failure and that are flexible”.<sup>[12]</sup> Having multiple initiatives under the Community Champions umbrella provides opportunities to consistently evaluate the initiatives to identify benefits and make adaptations and revisions as needed.

One key adaptation in service learning is the incorporation of credit-based service learning to community engagement. Since 1985, Penn has operated academically based community service (ABCS) courses, in which service is rooted in and intrinsically tied to research, teaching, and learning, ultimately contributing to significant structural community improvement.<sup>[17]</sup> The number of students taking service learning classes for credit continues to grow. Service learning addresses the competing priorities of many students: school work versus time to volunteer in the community. Developing a structure for students to receive credit for their work in the community could mitigate some of the competing priorities and continue to foster a commitment to the program. Students in ABCS courses reported an increase in their desire to act morally and ethically, to become an effective community leader, to be concerned about urban communities and to become a volunteer in the community.<sup>[18]</sup> In January 2017, Community Champion members collaborated with community members to integrate service learning and mentorship within the Dance for Health initiative providing high school students the opportunity to lead their elementary school peers in a community-based dance program. Since 2006, there has been a Dance for Health mentorship between nurse practi-

tioner students and students in the community.<sup>[19]</sup> A next step for Community Champions is to identify courses that would enhance the experience and knowledge of the students volunteering in these health focused initiatives. For over three decades, the Netter Center, the university center that operates ABCS courses in addition to other community programs such as University Assisted Community Schools, has strengthened the University of Pennsylvania's partnership within schools, community centers and community organizations throughout Philadelphia by providing resources, consistency in programming and balanced communication between students, community organizers and community members. Community Champions continues to work with the Netter Center to expand initiatives and strengthen community partnerships.

Volunteer consistency is essential, as it is the foundation in which the initiatives can grow both in the number of people who attends as well as the depth of content in each initiative. Consistent, truly engaged volunteers allows the initiatives to be tailored more directly to the needs of the community because the volunteers have a better understanding and familiarity with the community with whom they collaborate.<sup>[16]</sup> The University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing has a long-standing relationship with community partners and is committed to partnering with the community to "improve health and promote positive social change in communities around Philadelphia".<sup>[20]</sup> By trending volunteer attendance rates and exploring volunteer experiences and commitment to the Community Champion programs, we furthered our understanding of their involvement which can lead to stronger

community partnerships and the ability to identify and implement a more strategic approach to addressing the needs of the community.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Community Champions has committed students who regularly attend the weekly initiatives, leading to the sustainability and efficacy of the program. The students' involvement has enhanced their motivation and enthusiasm for service to the community and has influenced their career trajectory. Community engagement has facilitated Community Champions volunteers to utilize and build upon their communication and leadership skills in order to organize successful and impactful initiatives. The evaluation of Community Champions was crucial to make improvements and contribute to the sustainability of the program. Building a framework that alleviates the burden of competing priorities for students, such as incorporating service learning into course curricula, is a potential next step for the program to not only accommodate the interest of students, but also improve their academic performance, the consistency of programming and further research and evaluation of community programming.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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