

Development of a healthcare literacy semester-long course at a large private university

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Background

- Over a third of American adults lack competent healthcare literacy skills with over half of young adults aged 19-25 accounting for total ED visits, causing greater healthcare expenditures and worse health outcomes.^{1,2}
- A systematic review of health literacy interventions in higher education students showed significant improvements in student health outcomes calling for additional efficacious interventions.³

¹Hernandez-Boussard T, Burns CS, Wang NE, Baker LC, Goldstein BA. The Affordable Care Act reduces emergency department use by young adults: evidence from three States. *Health Aff (Millwood)*. 2014 Sep;33(9):1648-54. doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.2014.0103. Erratum in: *Health Aff (Millwood)*. 2015 Nov;34(11):2006. PMID: 25201671; PMCID: PMC4453768.
²Cutilli CC, Bennett IM. Understanding the health literacy of America: results of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy. *Orthop Nurs*. 2009 Jan-Feb;28(1):27-32; quiz 33-4. doi: 10.1097/01.NOR.0000345852.22122.d6. PMID: 19190475; PMCID: PMC2668931.
³Rosário, J., Raposo, B., Santos, E. et al. Efficacy of health literacy interventions aimed to improve health gains of higher education students—a systematic review. *BMC Public Health* 24, 882 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-18358-4>

Objective

To improve college student access to healthcare literacy resources and education.

Methodology

Setting: Boston University (BU)

Population: Undergraduate students

Design: We implemented the first healthcare literacy course at BU as a 14 week 0-credit pass/fail course with a general education requirement with Student Health Services.

Measurement: Pre- and post- course surveys measured healthcare literacy levels. Post-course interviews gathered qualitative feedback.

Results

Health VS. Health Care VS. Health Literacy

- Health: “A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” - WHO
- Health Care: A network of services offered by professionals who help prevent, treat, and manage illness, as well as preserve mental and physical well-being
- Health Literacy: Knowing how to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services need to make good health decisions

Self-Advocacy Qualities Checklist

- I ask questions
- I am prepared and organized
- I say what I want
- I am assertive, but respectful and polite
- I know my rights
- I take responsibility for myself
- I know where to get help or who to go to with a question
- I speak up for myself
- I am assertive, but respectful and polite

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Figure 1: Presentation slide taken from the course introduction lecture demonstrating the difference between common health-related terms.

Week 1
Unlearn What You Know About Being a Patient

Week 2
You, The Individual, in the Healthcare System

Week 3
Your Care Team: Providers and Medical Terminology

Week 4
Understanding Your Health Insurance

Week 5
Gather Provisions: Compiling Medical Records and Health Information

Week 6
Making Your Way Into the System: Finding the Right PCP

Week 7
How to Navigate an Appointment

Week 8
Enter the Pharmacy

Week 9
When it's an Emergency

Week 10
Managing a Chronic Condition

Week 11
Mental Health Navigation; Reproductive and Sexual Health

Week 12
Staying Ahead of the Game: Preventative Care

Figure 2: Course curriculum broken down into weekly overviews describing course topics.

- ❖ Classroom activities were implemented to enforce course content and engage students in the materials.
- ❖ Activities included role-playing provider encounters, building care coordination checklists, and self-reflecting on previous healthcare experiences.

Recommendations

- 1 Partner early with Student Health Services
- 2 Integrate healthcare navigation into university orientation
- 3 Respond to new developments in the healthcare system
- 4 Use low-pressure course structures to maximize engagement
- 5 Build partnerships with international student offices
- 6 Implement short-form health literacy workshops

Conclusion

- Through developing this pilot course, our experience suggests that intentional partnerships and flexible course structures enable student engagement.
- Healthcare literacy courses on university campuses are a promising opportunity to prepare students to confidently and independently navigate the healthcare system.