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Strengthening Community Health: A Qualitative Impact Assessment of a University-Led Health Education and Literacy Program in Its Partner Community

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study evaluated the Health Education and Literacy Program (HELP) of the University of Cebu–Lapu-Lapu and Mandaue (UCLM) in improving health literacy and promoting healthier behaviors among its partner communities. Using a phenomenological design, fourteen informants shared their experiences and perceptions of the program's relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability. Findings revealed that HELP enhanced participants' understanding of key health concepts, including nutrition, hygiene, disease prevention, and family-centered practices. Many reported applying their learning in daily routines, such as making healthier food choices, practicing improved hygiene, and engaging more actively in preventive health care. The program's interactive, community-centered approach featuring workshops, hands-on demonstrations, visual aids, and collaboration with local leaders was found to foster better engagement and knowledge retention. Participants recommended increasing the frequency of sessions, expanding to more barangays, and integrating follow-up activities such as free health check-ups and mental health education to ensure lasting impact. This study underscores the importance of culturally relevant, participatory health education initiatives in empowering individuals to adopt and promote healthier practices within their families and communities. Sustained and context-driven programs like HELP have the potential to create broader ripple effects, improving overall community well-being, particularly in underserved settings.

Keywords: *Cebu, Community-Based Health Education, Community Extension, Health Literacy, Philippines, Preventive Health Practices, Program Sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

Community extension is an essential initiative that higher education institutions undertake to contribute actively to the growth and development of local communities. It is a platform for fostering relationships that promote social transformation and sustainable progress (Montebon et al., 2023). Through these initiatives, institutions fulfill their mission of uplifting underprivileged sectors while cultivating in their stakeholders the values of empathy, social responsibility, and civic engagement (Montebon et al., 2022).

Providing community service is not merely an act of charity; it is a strategic approach to nation-building. Schools and universities strengthen their connection to society by directly engaging with communities and promoting equitable access to development opportunities. This reciprocal relationship

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allows institutions and communities to grow together, creating lasting partnerships founded on mutual benefit and shared goals (Montebon et al., 2023).

Volunteerism within community extension programs offers a profound learning experience for students. It enhances their academic performance, nurtures critical thinking, develops leadership potential, and builds self-confidence (Montebon et al., 2023). More importantly, it instills a sense of purpose and awareness that transcends classroom learning, making them more responsive to societal needs. Health literacy has emerged as a crucial determinant of public health, serving as a midstream factor that influences individual and community health outcomes. Although it does not singlehandedly address systemic inequities in health resources and opportunities, it significantly mediates the effects of social determinants of health (Nutbeam & Lloyd, 2021). Health literacy enables individuals to make informed decisions, prevent illnesses, and maintain healthier lifestyles, which are key to reducing health disparities in underserved populations.

In recent years, health education and literacy programs have gained recognition as vital strategies for bridging persistent gaps in public health awareness. These programs empower communities by providing accessible knowledge and tools to manage their health proactively. Universities, in particular, have emerged as crucial stakeholders in this mission, leveraging their expertise, human capital, and institutional resources to implement impactful health-focused outreach initiatives (Montebon et al., 2023). As defined by Liu et al. (2020), health literacy is the ability to obtain, process, and apply health-related information in ways appropriate to individual and systemic contexts. It is multifaceted, encompassing the capacity to read or understand medical instructions and the ability to navigate health systems, communicate with healthcare providers, and make informed choices that align with personal and cultural needs. Strong health literacy skills are especially critical among individuals with chronic health conditions striving for positive outcomes (Jackey et al., 2023).

Institutions that train future healthcare professionals bear an extended responsibility to promote health literacy beyond the confines of academic instruction. Restini et al. (2024) emphasize that universities have the potential to reach underrepresented groups and minority populations through structured community engagement and collaborative programs. This approach ensures that knowledge and care are not limited to hospitals and clinics but become accessible within the communities that need them the most. Within this context, the University of Cebu – Lapu-Lapu and Mandaue (UCLM) Campus has initiated the Health Education and Literacy Program (HELP) under the College of Nursing. The program aims to improve partner communities' health knowledge and practices by conducting activities focused on disease prevention, health promotion, and overall wellness. These efforts address community needs and provide valuable experiential learning opportunities for nursing students, bridging theory and practice in real-world healthcare settings.

Despite its continuous implementation, there is limited empirical evidence on the actual impact of HELP as perceived by its beneficiaries. Questions remain about how the program has influenced their knowledge, attitudes, and health-related behaviors. This gap in assessment underscores the importance of conducting research that foregrounds the voices and experiences of the partner communities themselves. Qualitative research, particularly a phenomenological approach, provides a valuable lens for exploring these lived experiences. By focusing on the authentic narratives of the beneficiaries, this method allows researchers to capture the nuanced ways in which the program affects their daily lives, health choices, and community dynamics. Such insights are critical to ensuring the relevance and sustainability of HELP and similar initiatives.

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Critical health literacy also significantly enables communities, especially older adults, to take informed actions for their health and well-being (De Wit et al., 2017). A community-based approach to health literacy thus not only empowers individuals but also fosters a culture of collective responsibility where health becomes a shared priority rather than a personal struggle. This study, therefore, seeks to conduct a qualitative impact assessment of the Health Education and Literacy Program to determine its influence on the partner community's health knowledge, practices, and overall well-being. It aims to identify the program's strengths, uncover areas for improvement, and provide recommendations for more inclusive and effective community health interventions.

By documenting the experiences of HELP's beneficiaries, this research contributes to the broader discourse on the role of higher education institutions in advancing health equity, literacy, and social responsibility. The findings are expected to serve as a foundation for strengthening HELP and guiding future community extension programs in achieving lasting and meaningful impact. Ultimately, this study reaffirms the commitment of the University of Cebu – Lapu-Lapu and Mandaue to its mission of transformative education and community partnership. Through research-driven insights, it endeavors to enhance the synergy between academic instruction and community service, ensuring that initiatives like HELP continue to be catalysts for positive change in the lives of the people they serve.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design and was conducted at the University of Cebu – Lapu-Lapu and Mandaue (UCLM) Campus. A phenomenological approach was employed to explore the lived experiences of the beneficiaries during the implementation of the various activities conducted by the College of Nursing under its Health Education and Literacy Program (HELP). A total of fourteen (14) informants were purposively selected based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. To qualify for participation, the beneficiaries must have availed of and actively participated in the activities offered by the College of Nursing as part of its community extension program, be of legal age, and have willingly provided their consent to participate in the study.

Ethical considerations were carefully followed throughout the study. The researchers applied the principles of objectivity, social responsibility, and non-discrimination. The researcher stayed neutral and professional during the interview, making sure that the personal opinions or emotions of the student beneficiaries were not affected. As part of social responsibility, the researchers aimed to make sure the results of the study would be helpful to different groups, such as the university, faculty, and students. Before starting, all participants were clearly informed about the purpose, scope, and goals of the study. Research informants were provided with informed consent and were told that joining the study was voluntary. Informants were also assured that they could stop participating without facing any consequences.

Confidentiality and privacy were strictly observed. All information gathered was used only for academic purposes and kept secure. Participants' names and identities were not included in any part of the reporting to ensure anonymity. The researchers used open and respectful communication to ensure precise and reliable results. This helped build trust and encouraged participants to share their honest thoughts and experiences. The researchers followed a careful process to collect and analyze the data correctly and fairly. These ethical practices helped protect the rights of all participants and ensured that the study was conducted with integrity.

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Enriched Learning through Interactive and Practical Health Education

The Health Education and Literacy Program (HELP) has been recognized as a dynamic and interactive learning experience that actively engages participants through lectures, demonstrations, and discussions. This multifaceted approach ensures that health education is informative and participatory, fostering an environment where learning becomes meaningful and memorable. One of the program's strengths is its use of hands-on activities and practical approaches, making complex health topics—such as nutrition, mental health, and disease prevention—more accessible and easier to comprehend. By presenting health concepts in relatable and simplified ways, participants could connect the information to their daily lives, enhancing their ability to apply what they learned in real-world settings.

Participants consistently highlighted the interactive nature of HELP as a key factor in their learning experience. One beneficiary expressed, *"During the HELP sessions, I appreciated how the facilitators explained health topics in a way that was easy to understand… the sessions usually involve lectures, demonstrations, and open discussions, which make them very interactive and informative."* This feedback underscores the program's ability to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

As supported by Kutbiddinova et al. (2016), effective training is made possible when competency-based, practice-oriented, and interactive teaching methods are employed. Such methods allow participants to share information, receive feedback, collaboratively solve emerging problems, simulate educational situations, and evaluate their actions and those of others. This aligns with the teaching strategies utilized by HELP, which emphasize real-life application and reflective learning. Interactive learning often incorporates problem-solving activities, encouraging learners to use their critical thinking skills to analyze information, assess potential outcomes, and generate solutions. These experiences deepen cognitive processing, improving retention and a more profound understanding of health concepts.

Furthermore, hands-on experiences and real-world scenarios empower participants to make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing. By engaging in these activities, learners do not passively absorb information but become active agents in their education, increasing their confidence in applying health-related knowledge effectively.

Empowerment and Skill Development through Participation

Participation in HELP also led to personal growth and empowerment among the informants. By being part of the program, they enhanced their communication, teaching, and facilitation skills while actively contributing to improving community health. This involvement created a deeper understanding of health challenges and motivated participants to share their knowledge with their families, peers, and community. One respondent shared, *"It helped me become more confident and taught me how to share health tips with others."* This reflects how the program benefited the community and nurtured the volunteers' professional and personal development, aligning health education with capacity-building objectives.

A systematic review by Gibbons et al. (2016) found that involving residents in community-academic initiatives—primarily through skills-based training within community-based participatory research (CBPR)—increased participant empowerment. They were given skills to participate meaningfully in asset-mapping, decision-making, and health promotion activities, strengthening individual and communal capacities. A study in *BMC Nursing* examined the effects of service-based learning among nursing students. The students who participated in community health nursing internships using service-based learning

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methods showed significant improvements in health education competencies—including communication, teamwork, leadership, critical thinking, and applying theory to practice (Emrani et al., 2024).

Interactive and Practical Health Learning

The participants emphasized that the Health Education and Literacy Program (HELP) provided accessible and engaging health education through lectures, discussions, and demonstrations. The sessions included practical strategies on hygiene, nutrition, disease prevention, family planning, and mental health, often supported by visual aids and handouts. This interactive approach made health topics easier to understand and remember, allowing participants to apply them daily. As one participant mentioned, *"The sessions were very informative and interactive. We usually listened to lectures, joined discussions, and sometimes had demonstrations on proper health practices. It was easy to understand and engaging."*

As Blyznyuk and Kachak (2024) emphasize, interaction in the learning process frequently involves collaborative activities that encourage participants to share insights, exchange ideas, and collectively develop strategies. This collaborative element of HELP reinforces community bonds, fosters mutual learning, and enhances the program's overall impact on individual and communal health practices.

Gratitude and Appreciation for Accessible Health Education

Participants consistently expressed gratitude and positive feelings toward the health education and guidance provided by the university. They valued how the program simplified health concepts, making them easier to understand and apply daily, while demonstrating the university's genuine concern for their wellbeing. This appreciation reflects the importance of delivering health information that resonates with the community's needs. One informant stated, *"I felt grateful for health education and guidance from the university because it made health topics easier to understand and apply daily. It also showed the school's concern for the community's wellbeing."*

A study by Afrasiabifar et al. (2021) highlighted the significant benefits of using interactive learning methods in a health promotion course for undergraduate students. The study revealed that such approaches actively engaged learners physically and cognitively, enhanced their comprehension of complex topics, and fostered meaningful idea-sharing among participants. Furthermore, interactive strategies promoted self-esteem, self-confidence, and strengthened interpersonal communication skills, creating a more dynamic and participatory learning environment. These findings strongly align with the experiences of HELP participants, who expressed that the combination of lectures, demonstrations, and discussions made health topics easier to understand, more engaging, and better retained in their daily lives.

Empowerment and Motivation Toward Healthier Practices

Beyond gratitude, the program fostered a sense of empowerment and motivation among participants, encouraging them to make informed health decisions and share what they learned with others. The guidance they received not only reinforced their knowledge and skills but also enhanced their confidence to practice and promote healthier lifestyles. One participant shared, *"I felt grateful and empowered receiving health education and guidance from the university. It gave me valuable knowledge I can apply in daily life and share with others."*

A study conducted by Lin et al. (2019) revealed that participation in a community-based participatory health literacy program significantly improved health behaviors and empowerment among

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older adults. Participants in the intervention group demonstrated notable progress in weight control practices, engagement in regular physical activity, and effective navigation of health information resources. Furthermore, they reported substantially higher levels of empowerment than those in the control group. These findings emphasize that structured and participatory health education initiatives can foster confidence, enhance self-efficacy, and motivate individuals to adopt and advocate for healthier lifestyle practices—closely aligning with the experiences of HELP participants who expressed feeling empowered and inspired to share their health knowledge with others.

Enhanced Awareness and Application of Preventive Health Practices

The program significantly improved participants' awareness and application of preventive health measures such as hygiene, nutrition, early check-ups, and disease prevention. They reported adopting healthier habits in their daily routines, including balanced meals, regular exercise, and proactive consultations for symptoms. This indicates that the program successfully translated knowledge into action, fostering sustainable lifestyle improvements. One participant shared, *"The program helped me improve my health knowledge by teaching me important topics like proper hygiene, nutrition, and disease prevention. It also guided me in applying healthy practices in my daily life, like eating balanced meals and keeping good personal hygiene."*

The results reveal that targeted health awareness programs significantly influence individuals' participation in preventive healthcare, with higher levels of awareness leading to better health outcomes (Ngyozie et al., 2024). Preventive medicine enhances public health by emphasizing early detection and disease prevention rather than focusing solely on treatment. Routine health screenings, a cornerstone of preventive healthcare, significantly reduce the overall disease burden, improve patient outcomes, and lower healthcare costs. According to Altwaijri et al. (2017), routine health screenings are instrumental in the early diagnosis and management of chronic diseases, allowing timely interventions and reducing long-term complications.

Empowerment to Share and Influence Health Practices in the Community

Beyond personal improvement, the program empowered participants to share their health knowledge and influence others' practices, particularly among family members, peers, and patients. They developed the confidence to become health advocates within their communities through reporting, discussions, and active participation in health-related activities. As one informant stated, *"By doing the reporting as soon as I get my assigned topic, I am usually pressured to do my own research and reflection so I can understand and apply them on my own, and by that, that's how I learn and become confident enough to share my knowledge with other people."*

A systematic review by Haldane et al. (2019) examined community participation in developing, implementing, and evaluating health services. The study found that when residents engage through skills-based training, such as asset mapping activities and community-based participatory research initiatives, it can lead to tangible empowerment. Participants gained confidence, developed competencies, and felt capable of meaningfully contributing to and influencing their communities' health practices.

Increased Health Consciousness and Informed Decision-Making

The program has made participants more aware of their daily health habits and decisions, particularly regarding hygiene, nutrition, stress management, and preventive care. It encouraged them to

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make wiser choices such as seeking medical help, avoiding unhealthy practices, and maintaining a balanced lifestyle. This shift demonstrates the program's success in translating health education into meaningful behavioral changes. One participant shared, *"The program has influenced my daily life by making me more conscious of healthy habits and lifestyle choices. It guided my health decisions, such as maintaining proper hygiene, eating balanced meals, and being proactive in preventing illness."*

A qualitative longitudinal evaluation by McKenna et al. (2018) examined health literacy development among individuals attending a structured community-based cardiovascular risk reduction program. Through repeat interviews conducted 12 weeks into the intervention, participants demonstrated enhanced awareness and understanding of cardiovascular health—particularly regarding food choices—enabling them to recognize and act upon hidden sources of sugars, fats, and sodium. This translated into more informed dietary decisions, showcasing the program's ability to move knowledge into meaningful, practical behavior changes.

Strengthened Family Health Awareness and Advocacy

Beyond personal impact, the program enabled participants to influence their families' health behaviors and awareness, creating a ripple effect within their households. They shared health information, encouraged preventive practices such as regular check-ups and breast self-examinations, and even corrected misconceptions rooted in traditional beliefs. This indicates the program's role in fostering not just individual change but also family-level health advocacy. As one informant reflected, *"I encourage my parents to get their eyes checked and remind my relatives about the importance of breast self-examination. The knowledge I gained made me more proactive in making healthy decisions and spreading awareness at home."*

In the study of Albahrani (2024), A 12-week, culturally tailored, family-centered health education program in Al-Hofuf, Saudi Arabia, demonstrated substantial benefits for both patients with type 2 diabetes and their family members. Participants experienced significant improvements in diabetes knowledge, self-care behaviors, and family support—all of which correlated with meaningful clinical outcomes, including reductions in HbA1c, fasting blood glucose, and BMI. These findings underscore the empowering potential of family-focused interventions to enhance health advocacy and drive collective well-being within the household.

Increased Program Frequency and Expanded Reach

Participants suggested that the university could enhance its impact by conducting programs more regularly and in multiple barangays, ensuring that more residents benefit from health education and services. They emphasized the importance of consistent follow-up sessions, outreach, and free health check-ups to sustain the program's positive outcomes. This reflects a community demand for continuity and broader access to university-led health initiatives. One respondent shared, *"The university can further serve the community by conducting these programs more regularly and in different barangays so more people can benefit. Providing materials like pamphlets in the local language and offering follow-up check-ups would also be helpful."*

Participants recommended that the university increase the frequency of its programs and expand their coverage to multiple barangays, integrating culturally relevant materials in the local language, conducting follow-up check-ups, and offering regular sessions to reinforce learning and promote sustained health behaviors. This suggestion reflects a community-driven call for continuity and broader access to health services. Comparable findings were reported by Bumb et al. (2024) in a rural oral health initiative,

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where bi-weekly educational sessions conducted over six months led to significant improvements in dental hygiene practices, a reduction in Decayed, Missing, and Filled Teeth (DMFT) scores, enhanced gingival health, and a notable increase in routine dental check-ups.

Community-Centered and Interactive Approach

Informants also highlighted the need for programs to be more tailored to the community's specific health needs and to include interactive components such as workshops, hands-on demonstrations, and locally relevant materials. They believe collaborating with local leaders, using visual aids, and integrating mental health, vaccination drives, and family-oriented sessions can strengthen the program's relevance and impact. One participant said, *"The university can better serve the community by making programs like this more frequent and accessible, focusing on relevant local health issues, and providing hands-on activities or free check-ups alongside the education."*

A study on health-education materials for low-literacy audiences found that visual aids co-designed with intended users significantly improved comprehension and health-literacy outcomes, emphasizing the importance of locally relevant, easy-to-use materials and stakeholder participation (Mbanda et al., 2021). A systematic review and meta-analysis on vaccination promotion revealed that community engagement—including collaboration with local leaders, co-development of interventions, health education discussions, and follow-up service support—significantly increased vaccination rates, with tailored approaches proving more effective than generic interventions (Xie et al., 2024). These findings align with the participants' recommendations, highlighting that integrating interactive workshops, hands-on demonstrations, and locally tailored health initiatives—such as mental health and vaccination drives—can strengthen the program's overall impact.

CONCLUSION

The Health Education and Literacy Program (HELP) significantly improved health literacy, promoted preventive practices, and fostered empowerment among community members. Participants reported greater confidence in making informed health decisions, applying healthy habits in daily life, and sharing knowledge within their families and social circles. The interactive and community-tailored approach strengthened individual capacity and created ripple effects at household and community levels, reinforcing the value of continuous, culturally relevant, and collaborative health education initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase Program Frequency and Coverage by conducting regular HELP sessions and expanding to multiple barangays, ensuring broader access to health services and education.
- Enhance community participation by actively collaborating with local leaders, stakeholders, and families in program planning, implementation, and follow-up activities.
- Integrate culturally relevant and interactive methods, such as visual aids, hands-on workshops, and locally designed materials, to address diverse literacy levels and health priorities.
- Implement Sustainable Follow-Up Mechanisms by providing periodic health screenings, check-ups, and refresher sessions to sustain behavioral change and reinforce learning.

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