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Student Feedback on Advocacy

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Student Feedback on Advocacy

Health Communication Class

*"I have learned that if you never ask, you will never know,
and the changes may never happen."*

This report documents the feedback on the student canvassing portion of the Breastfeeding-Friendly Businesses Initiative. The feedback was provided from undergraduate and graduate students in the Health Communication class at South Dakota State University. These students participated in two in-class training days (totaling 3 hours) and two community advocacy periods (totaling 3 hours). They provided feedback on the training, the advocacy experience, the initiative itself, and their learning.

One student's story

Our experience with one business was a perfect microcosm of this "controversy" in our society. The owner was very willing to sign our pledge and participate, but he was not willing to say breastfeeding. It took a lot for me not to laugh. Here was a 60+ year old man who, with each and every time his sentences led him to the phrase breast feeding, he would very noticeably hesitate and substitute the phrase for something like "do that," or "take care of things," or just "feed." I think his reaction perfectly illustrates the dilemma we face as a society. Very few actually see a problem with it, but so many see it as awkward or uncomfortable. I think it is this discomfort that is why so few stand up to make things change, when in fact, that is what society needs. The more exposure someone has to something seen as uncomfortable or awkward, the less it becomes something that is awkward or uncomfortable. It normalizes, and surprisingly quick too.

Training

Students enjoyed the training and felt it prepared them to conduct the advocacy efforts. They found the "fishbowl" activity—where volunteers act out different scenarios in front of the audience—to be extremely useful for envisioning how the advocacy would play out. Many students reported feeling nervous or anxious prior to training, but then feeling confident and prepared to advocate as a result of the training. The students also appreciated all of the information about breastfeeding, and the initiative itself, including the pre-written advocacy speech outline.

"Doing the "fishbowl" activity of seeing how different reactions might go was great for me to understand how to deal with different situations and what kind of problems might arise. It gave me the opportunity to think of how to battle difficult situations with ease during our advocacy day."

Advocacy Experiences

Students' advocacy experiences were mixed, but mostly positive. In general, students were pleased with a) businesses' awareness of the initiative and b) their willingness to speak with students about this issue.

"The most surprising part about the experience was how educated most people were about the initiative. Almost everyone said they had heard about it on the radio."

Students' biggest challenges were a) businesses' unawareness of the laws and b) corporately-owned businesses who could not provide immediate responses.

The thing that surprised me the most about the experience was how uneducated people were on the laws.

Students noted that they often did not need the entire script, because a) they felt comfortable speaking without it and b) it was almost immediately clear whether businesses wanted to sign or not, so they didn't need to keep speaking.

It was surprising how easy it is to actually promote something you believe in and doing something like this can truly make a difference in our community.

Feedback on the Initiative Itself

Students felt the initiative was extremely well-planned, well-executed, and well-advertised. They also appreciated that the initiative was based on facts and laws, in addition to evidence-based health information. But they noticed that this issue itself is a challenging one to target due to cultural norms.

This project can be challenging because not only are we advocating for a polarizing initiative, we are also trying to change public perception on breastfeeding.

Advertising

Typically, students felt that the advocacy was successful in part because businesses had been primed with enough advertising and information that they were ready to respond when the students visited them. Although, some students did encounter businesses who were both unaware of breastfeeding laws & benefits, as well as the breastfeeding-friendly business initiative. In addition, businesses appreciated that they would receive free publicity through the healthysd.gov website.

Informational Materials

Students really liked the informational materials, because they were informative but also accessible. They wished they could have sent or left the informational packets with every business, in order for them to learn more. They also hoped that businesses could initiate conversations about this topic with both employees and customers.

Personal Advocacy

Students felt that the in-person advocacy approach was very successful, because it's "harder to say no to someone's face." They also appreciated having the pitch laid out for them, but felt that it could be shortened or condensed.

Survey

The survey was typically more confusing than helpful, in terms of formatting and execution. Students also ran into some resistance when doing the survey, both with businesses that signed and did not sign the pledge. Many businesses simply did not want to take the time to do the survey. Businesses who did not sign sometimes felt badgered/interrogated by the questions.

Student Advocates

The students really enjoyed the experience, and many felt that businesses were very receptive to them especially because they were students. However, other students felt that—as students—they lacked a level of professionalism and expertise that would have improved the outcomes of the project.

Window Cling

Many businesses declined to hang the window cling, even though they signed the pledge and fully supported the initiative. This typically had to do with store policies regarding window signage. This barrier was also observed at South Dakota State University.

Targeting Businesses

Students appreciated the blanket approach of our advocacy, but felt that we could have created a more focused campaign **targeting locally-owned businesses that are highly likely to have breastfeeding employees and customers**. Locally-owned businesses were much more likely to take the pledge than corporately-owned businesses, in part because of approval processes for larger chain-type businesses. Thus, targeting locally-owned businesses could provide. For example, targeting local retailers and restaurants with high foot traffic and family-friendly atmospheres could make a broader impact. They also suggested targeting large, local employers that are likely to have multiple, female employees. In some cases, students visited businesses with fewer than five employees, and these businesses often had difficulty seeing the relevance of this initiative to their company.

Transferability Outside of Brookings

Students thought the initiative was very well done, but wondered how well it will work in other communities with different resources and cultural norms.

I do, however, wonder how well this will go in a town that has not had the advantages of both heavy media exposure and the small town “everybody knows everybody” charm that Brookings has the fortune of displaying.

Learning

Students learned a great deal about breastfeeding, community health, and advocacy.

I learned that health communication has a powerful impact on the community. A simple action of stopping into a local business and openly talking about breastfeeding was able to prompt several businesses to pledge to be breastfeeding friendly.

In terms of breastfeeding, they reported being unaware of the various benefits and the social barriers to breastfeeding that exist in our community and others. In terms of community health, they learned that providing information about a health issue often is not enough to generate behavior changes, since we are sometimes looking for a cultural shift. In terms of advocacy, students saw the benefits of speaking

up for something you believe in and actively working to improve one's community. They also enjoyed the opportunity to practice and apply their communication skills in a real-world context.

Overall, students gained insight into the amount of time and effort it takes to generate changes in individual and community health behaviors.

I think the greatest thing I have learned from this experience is that change is hard and takes time.

Conclusion

Students were an invaluable resource for personal advocacy in the Breastfeeding-Friendly Business Initiative Pilot Project in Brookings, SD. Their efforts led to over 60 businesses signing the pledge. They provided useful feedback on the training, materials, advocacy, and overall initiative that will be useful in future endeavors. Specifically, future interventions should carefully consider: a) the role of the clinic and b) targeting specific business types.

One student's story

I think I would fall into that category of someone with no objection to breast feeding, but would do a double take if I saw it in public. I would not be disturbed, but I would find it out of the ordinary. I think that comes with my immaturity and lack of familiarity in regards to the entire process of raising an infant. I appreciate this opportunity to step out of my comfort zone and help make a difference for those who have no choice but to step out of theirs for the sake of their child. It is an injustice in our society; one that I am not innocent of, but one I am excited to be a part of making the change.