

Community Engagement as a Tool for Teaching Professional Identity and Social Determinants of Health

K. Alexis Moore, DMSc, MPH, PA-C; Summer Dunlap, PA-S; Mary O'Connell, PA-C

BACKGROUND

Social determinants of health (SDOH) in PA education are defined in recent updates to *competencies for the profession*. But embedding this topic into meaningful learning activities can be challenging. Creating experiential learning experiences through community engagement is one way to accomplish this goal. Start Early in Medicine (SEIM) is a grant funded project designed to expose middle to early high school students to the field of medicine and to create possible future pipelines to the profession. PA students (PAs) adapt a PA program first year curriculum and teach anatomy, physiology, and physical examination of select body systems to learners from local underserved school districts. Through this process, PAs begin exploring their professional identities as educators and their roles in addressing social determinants of health. This poster session focuses on innovative ways that a community engagement project transformed student learning experiences with SDOH and professional identity development.

INTRODUCTION

Physician assistant (PA) students are required to engage with social determinants of health (SDOH) during their training, but moving from theory to practical application can be challenging. Community engagement in the didactic year can create meaningful experiences that bridge that gap.

One such engagement is through Start Early in Medicine (SEIM). This program provides middle and early high school Black and Latino males with instruction and mentoring by PAs, helping them engage with medical knowledge and practice. It seeks to:

- Promote medicine as a profession for African-American and Latino males.
- Bolster PA student professional identity development through community engagement, teaching, and interaction with complex SDOH.

This study assessed the program's effects on PAs and SEIM participants.

METHODS

Surveys were administered to PAs, SEIM participants, and their guardians in each of the two program years (time 0 and time 1). PA surveys covered perceptions about teaching, personal growth, and interactions with underserved populations. SEIM participants responded about class engagement, interest in medicine, and confidence level. Guardians received quantitative and qualitative questions about their child's science grades and interest in the coursework.

Preliminary data analysis included paired t-tests of times 0 and 1 for each group. A repeated measures analysis of variance will be used to investigate change in levels of interest in medicine among SEIM participants at times 0, 1, and 2 (year 3). Emergent qualitative themes were identified and coded.

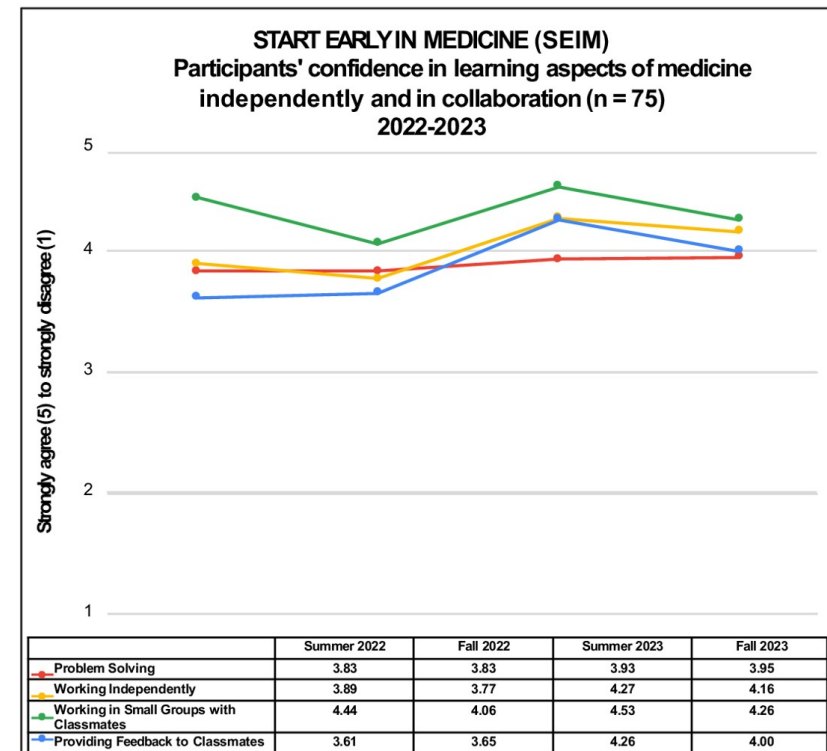
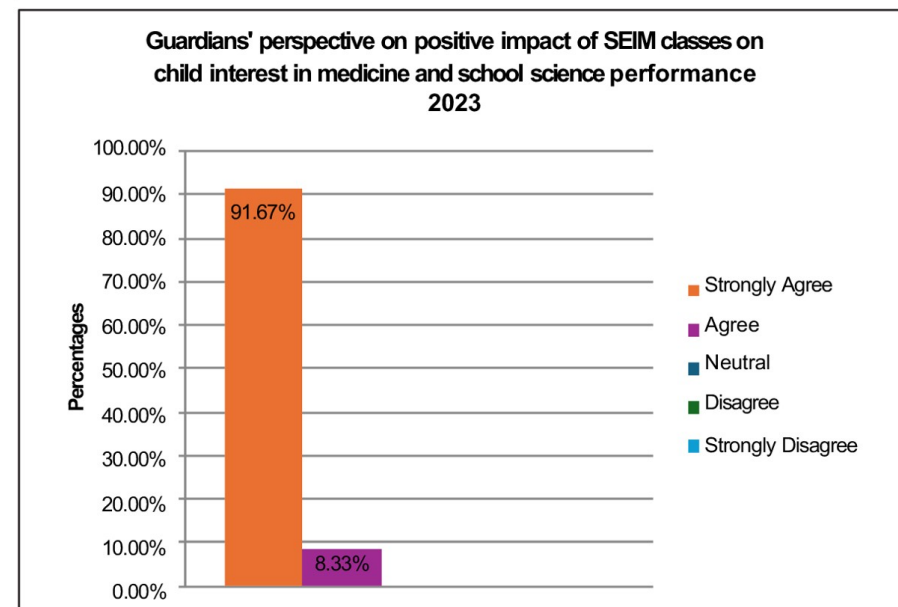
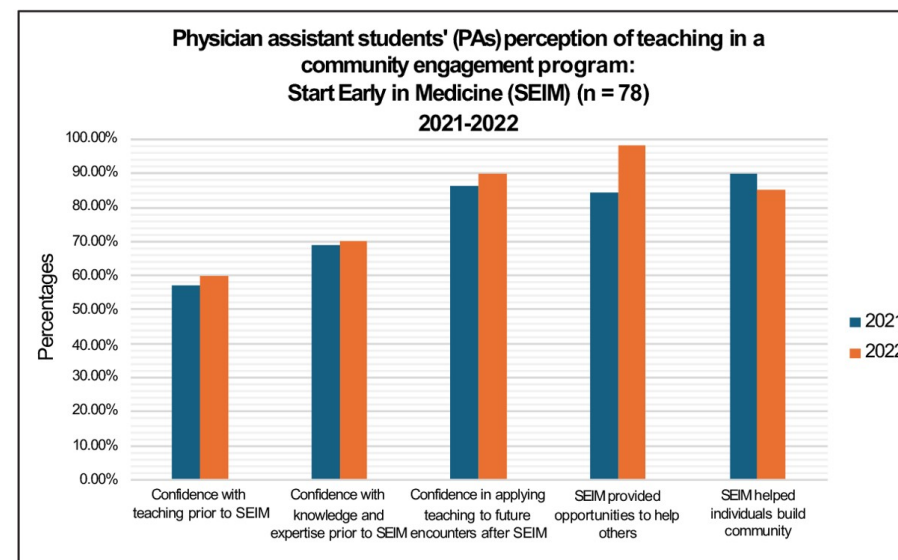
RESULTS

"The program has peaked my son's interest in medicine. He researched various topics on his own and often challenges existing practices, seeking new ways of providing care to those in need." – Response from 2023 Guardian Survey

Seventy-six PA students, 75 middle school students comprised of: 5th graders (40%), 6th graders (7%), 7th graders (14%), and 8th graders (39%) participated. Twenty-three high schoolers were evenly divided between 9th and 10th grade (39% each) and 11th graders comprised (22%). Thirty guardians also participated. PAs' confidence as educators remained constant between time 0 and 1 ($p = .005$). Comfort ($p = .012$) and knowledge ($p = .001$) with engaging with communities different than their own improved significantly.

SEIM participants' confidence in learning medicine began and remained high ($p < .001$). Guardians reported a positive effect on their children's interest in medicine, school science performance ($p = .001$) and ability to apply SEIM material to non-science coursework.

PAs learned to work with a young minority population, improve communication skills with future patients, and understand complex community structures that affect healthcare outcomes. SEIM participants acquired knowledge through mentorship and kinesthetic-based learning, encouraging them to see themselves in medical careers. Guardians desired longer sessions and remained supportive of the SEIM program.



CONCLUSIONS

A community engagement curriculum tailored towards SDOH and identity development improved PAs' confidence in their role and their ability to see SDOH effects on the communities they serve.

Limitations of this study include small sample size, that the sample was from only one university, and the possibility of response bias to open-ended questions. Further research examining the effect of community engagement projects on PA students is warranted.

REFERENCES

1. The Physician Assistant Education Association. Competencies for the PA Profession. Accessed February 28, 2023. <https://paeonline.org/our-work/current-issues/competencies-for-the-pa-profession>
2. Nguemeni TMJ, Johnson SF, Nkinsi NT, Landry A. Normalizing service learning in medical education to sustain medical student-led Initiatives. *Acad Med*. 2021;96(12):1634-1637. doi:10.1097/ACM.0000000000004432
3. Pagatpatan CP, Valdezco JAT, Lauron JDC. Teaching the affective domain in community-based medical education: a scoping review. *Med Teach*. 2020;42(5):507-514. doi:10.1080/0142159X.2019.1707175
4. Forest CP, Lie DA. Impact of a required service-learning curriculum on preclinical students. *J Physician Assist Educ*. 2018; 29(2):70-76. doi: 10.1097/JPA.000000000000193
5. Magpantay-Monroe ER, Koka OH, Aipa K. Community engagement leads to professional identity formation of nursing students. *Asian Pac Isl Nurs J*. 2020;5(3):181-184. doi:10.31372/20200503.1105