Brazilian Universities as Engines of Community Health

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Before studying abroad in Brazil, I always thought about universities only as places where students receive an education and researchers conduct studies. During my time at the State University of Londrina (UEL) and the University of São Paulo School of Nursing (USP), I started to see universities differently. I saw how academic institutions could be part of the communities around them and how education, research, healthcare, and public health overlap. Students were not only learning about health in classrooms. They were participating in research, assisting with community programs, and interacting with people who were actively working to improve their health. My experiences at UEL and USP showed me that Brazilian universities function as more than places for education and research, they serve as direct connections between students, researchers, healthcare systems, and communities. Through research programs, community-based exercise initiatives, cancer prevention programs, and public health services, these universities demonstrate how academic institutions can contribute directly to health promotion. This relationship offers an important lesson for nursing and health sciences students in the United States: universities can strengthen community health when they invest in research that directly involves communities, provide students with meaningful hands-on experiences, and develop sustained connections between academic institutions and public health.

This project uses a qualitative, community-engaged approach informed by community-based participatory research principles to explore how universities in Brazil connect research, education, and community health. During my study abroad experience, I engaged in informal discussions and interactions with staff, researchers, and students at the State University of Londrina (UEL) and the University of São Paulo (USP). These conversations provided insight into their experiences, perspectives, and involvement in research programs, community health activities, and public health initiatives. By learning directly from individuals involved in these programs, I aimed to understand how universities contribute to community health beyond traditional classroom and clinical settings. Data collection is in progress, and additional perspectives from staff and students will continue to inform the project. The information gathered will help identify opportunities to strengthen connections between university research, student learning, and community-based health initiatives.

One of the clearest examples of this relationship was the research and community exercise program I observed at UEL. The program involved older adult women participating in supervised strength training. On the surface, this could simply look like an exercise study. However, after seeing the program in person, I understood that it provided much more than physical activity. The women returned regularly to participate in the program, working to improve their strength and overall health. Student research assistants were also involved,

allowing them to gain experience working directly with community members while contributing to research. The program therefore created a relationship in which the community benefited from an accessible health promotion activity while students and researchers were able to learn from the participants and collect information that could contribute to future research.

This experience changed how I thought about research. Research is often presented to students as something that happens separately from everyday healthcare. We learn about studies, evidence-based practice, and research findings, but it can be easy to forget that research begins with real people and real communities. Previously, when I thought of research, data collection and analysis would come to mind. At UEL, I saw how research goes beyond this research to become part of people's everyday lives. The participants were not simply subjects who contributed data. They were individuals who came together consistently to improve their health. The university provided the structure, knowledge, and research support necessary to make that possible.

This type of program also demonstrated how research can contribute to community health over time. The information collected through these studies can help researchers understand the effects of different health interventions and potentially inform future programs. In this way, research creates a cycle. Universities conduct research, communities participate in programs, students gain experience, and the information gathered can contribute to future health initiatives. The benefits extend beyond the immediate study.

Another program that demonstrated this connection was Correndo Contra o Câncer. What stood out to me was not only the physical activity involved but also the community that developed around the program. Participants were individuals who were working to improve their health and had different experiences with cancer and health challenges. Being surrounded by others pursuing similar goals created opportunities for connection and support. This showed me that community health interventions do not have to focus exclusively on an individual's physical condition. They can also create social environments that encourage people to continue working toward their health goals. Also, it allows individuals to form meaningful connections with others who have shared or common experience, which may be more encouraging to continue attending.

This is particularly important when thinking about health promotion. As nursing students, we are often taught to assess physical symptoms, identify risks, provide education, and develop interventions. These skills are essential, but community health requires us to think beyond the individual patient. People's health is influenced by their environment, relationships, resources, and opportunities to participate in healthy activities. Programs such as Correndo Contra o Câncer demonstrated how a health intervention can address several of these factors simultaneously. Physical activity can support health, while participation in a group can provide social connection and motivation.

The programs at UEL also showed me that universities can create mutually beneficial opportunities for students and communities. I learned that Brazilian university students face financial and educational circumstances that can influence whether they work while studying. During my experience, I learned about an exception involving research: students who participate in certain research opportunities can receive support while continuing their education. What interested me most was how research could therefore become both an educational experience and an opportunity for students to contribute to their own financial needs. Rather than research being something students encounter only after graduation, it can become part of their university experience.

For health sciences students, this type of opportunity is especially valuable. Students can learn how to interact with community members, collect and interpret information, participate in research teams, and understand how health interventions operate outside of a traditional clinical setting. These experiences can also help students recognize that their future careers are not limited to bedside care. Nurses and other health professionals can contribute to research, prevention, health education, policy, and community programming.

My experience at USP further expanded my understanding of the relationship between universities and public health. During our time in São Paulo, we learned about public health programs and visited healthcare settings connected to broader health initiatives. These experiences showed me how universities can exist within a larger network that includes hospitals, clinics, government health systems, researchers, and communities. The university is not isolated from public health. Instead, it can contribute knowledge, professionals, research, and training to the systems that serve the population.

This relationship is particularly meaningful in Brazil because of the connection between academic institutions and the country's public healthcare system, SUS. During the program, I saw examples of how public health initiatives, research, and healthcare can intersect. For students, being exposed to these connections provides an opportunity to understand healthcare as a system rather than simply a series of individual patient encounters. This perspective is valuable for nursing because nurses regularly see how social conditions and healthcare systems affect individual patients.

At the same time, my experience does not mean that the Brazilian approach should simply be transferred to the United States. Brazil and the United States have different healthcare systems, university structures, funding mechanisms, and populations. Instead, the important lesson for U.S. nursing and health sciences students is the value of creating stronger connections between universities and the communities they serve.

The United States is a highly developed country, but that does not mean that every community has equal access to healthcare or public health resources. There are still gaps in prevention, healthcare access, rural health, chronic disease management, and other areas of population

health. Universities are already major centers of research and education in the United States, but my experience in Brazil made me think about how much more meaningful that research can become when communities are directly involved.

For me personally, this experience created a new appreciation for research. Before traveling to Brazil, I understood that research was important to nursing because evidence-based practice depends on research. However, seeing research programs in action helped me understand that research can also create community. The older women participating in strength training were not simply contributing data to a university. They were building relationships and participating in an activity designed to improve their health. Similarly, Correndo Contra o Câncer demonstrated how a health program could provide both physical activity and social connection. These experiences helped me see research as something that can directly affect people's lives.

This is an important lesson for nursing students in the United States because nursing education can sometimes emphasize what happens at the bedside. Bedside nursing is essential, but nurses also have an opportunity to contribute to health before someone enters a hospital. Community based participatory research, health promotion, disease prevention, and public health interventions can address health concerns earlier and create opportunities for people to improve their health in their own communities. Universities can help prepare students for this broader role by creating opportunities to participate in community research and public health programs.

Ultimately, my experience at UEL and USP showed me that universities can be engines of community health when they connect education and research with the needs of real people. The programs I observed demonstrated that research can generate knowledge while simultaneously creating opportunities for exercise, social connection, prevention, and health promotion. Students can learn from communities while communities benefit from the resources and expertise of universities. This relationship also has the potential to strengthen public health systems by creating a continuous connection between research, education, and practice.

The most important lesson I am taking from Brazil is that health does not have to be separated into individual categories of research, education, healthcare, and community. These areas can support one another. Universities have the resources and knowledge to become important partners in improving community health, and nursing and health sciences students can be part of that process. My experience in Brazil made me recognize the importance of investing in research that reaches beyond the university and into the communities universities are meant to serve. As I continue my nursing education, I want to carry this perspective with me. Healthcare is not only about treating people when they become sick. It is also about creating communities, conducting meaningful research, promoting prevention, and building systems that give people opportunities to improve their health.