

An International Comparison of Animal Assisted Therapy Curricula through the Eyes of Students in the United States and Spain

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Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a complementary therapy and tool that shows promise in providing emotional and social benefits to clients in both clinical and community settings. AAT describes the use of licensed animals by health professionals in reaching set goals and falls under the broader term, animal-assisted interventions (AAI).¹ According to the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) of 2012, the use of complementary therapies is on the rise in the United States, however, AAT is not listed as one of the approaches.² Nursing schools are challenged to incorporate complementary therapies into curricula as there is an increase in use of these therapies in the community and clinical settings.³ Even though a specific listing is not found on the NHIS, AAT can be grouped as a complementary therapy often utilized by many health professionals in the United States^{4,5} and has a place in current nursing and health professional curricula. This abstract describes a collaboration between a school of nursing and a Spanish animal assisted intervention program located in Navarra, Spain. This collaboration set out to recognize the similarities and differences between AAT programs to enhance curricula design and delivery.

Current evidence has demonstrated the positive effects AAT has provided for clients and personnel in varying settings ranging from clinics, hospitals, schools, and behavioral health programs.⁶⁻⁸ As such, a school of nursing in the Southeastern United States chose to incorporate an AAT elective course into the current nursing curricula. The course began over five years ago. The objectives of the course are to describe the history and health benefits of animal-assisted therapy and the human-animal bond, explain how the human-animal bond maximizes the quality of life for recipients, and understand the connection of animal-assisted therapy and the nursing process. The course was structured around standards and protocols for AAT set within the United States.

In the summer of 2019, a nursing faculty explored AAT modalities outside of the United States to expand the current course objectives for the AAT elective course. The goal was to add an international approach to learning and teaching and explore best practices relating to Spanish culture. This faculty visited an animal assisted intervention program in Spain to build an international piece within the current elective course. The faculty worked with therapists from Biak Bat in Navarra, Spain. Biak Bat is a non-profit organization which focuses on education, training, and services in animal assisted interventions.⁹ The day long visit provided information regarding AAT training, service animal and therapy animal laws in Spain, research in AAT, policies, and a meet and greet of all their animals in the space (dogs, cats, and birds). This visit opened the door to opportunities to enhance the current Spain study abroad program, the AAT elective course offered at the school of nursing in the Southeastern United states, as well as future collaborative efforts between both Biak Bat and the school of nursing.

Fall 2019 and the beginning of spring 2020 semesters, faculty began restructuring the Spain study abroad course for pre-nursing and current nursing students to incorporate complementary therapies utilized in Spanish clinics. This course included concepts learned from the visit to Biak Bat the previous summer. Nursing students attending the summer abroad program 2020 in Spain would attend a day program at Biak Bat. The objectives for the day program were to better understand the roles of animals as a therapy and the Spanish regulations surrounding service and therapy animals in Spain. This multicultural experience would provide students insight into complementary therapy offered in different parts of the world. Students would then develop a program highlighting topics learned then share their findings during the AAT nursing elective course the following semester as a means to engage the students in teaching pedagogy.

There is a need to further explore animal assisted therapy within the academic setting to include interdisciplinary collaboration, health and self-care and student engagement in the company of canines and other animals. In the spring of 2020, all international travel was halted. In addition, uncertainty

surrounding future travel existed as new reports came from the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic influenced future teaching and learning by suspending previous methods of teaching and learning multicultural concepts. Travel and in-person instruction was altered, but technology and acceptance for alternate forms of meeting and collaboration utilizing programs such as Zoom was embraced and encouraged. Zoom allows for video communication to bring groups together.¹⁰ Faculty within the school of nursing and therapists at Biak Bat have an opportunity to work together in developing programs for emerging health professionals in both the United States and Spain. Utilizing platform such as Zoom, students and faculty can engage with practitioners across the world to learn complementary therapy offered in Spain without traveling to Spain. This collaboration has the potential to advance research, develop skills, and develop faculty from an international perspective.

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