

## **An assessment of empathy among students in the health sciences**

Ralph Wood, Southeastern Louisiana University  
Angie R. Wood, Southeastern Louisiana University  
Renee Underwood, Southeastern Louisiana University  
Eddie Hebert, Southeastern Louisiana University

The ability to communicate empathy is a foundational skill for all professionals working in a helping field. The purpose of the research was to assess the empathy skills of students enrolled in the College of Nursing and Health Sciences at a mid-sized university in the southeastern U.S. In March and April of 2023, all students enrolled in a major housed in the college were invited to complete a 60-question survey in a study assessing their empathy levels. The survey included the Interpersonal Reactivity Index Assessment of Empathy (IRI), which assesses empathy across 4 subscales: Perspective Taking, Fantasy, Empathic Concerns, and Personal Distress. A total of 538 students participated in the study. The sample was predominantly female (82%), white (78%), and upperclassman or graduate students (69%). The most common majors participating in the study were nursing (22%), health sciences (20%), and kinesiology (14%). Women reported significantly higher total empathy scores and Empathic Concern subscale scores. Regarding major, counseling students reported a significantly higher total empathy score than kinesiology. Counseling and social work students reported significantly higher Empathic Concern subscale scores than Kinesiology students. No significant differences were found in total IRI scores when comparing students by grade classification; however, the higher the student's class standing, the higher their Empathic Concern score. Students who reported participating in a volunteer experience or employment that included regular contact with patients had a significantly higher total IRI score. Not surprisingly, graduate-level counseling students reported the highest Empathy scores. This may be attributable to regular course work that includes empathy skills and internship experiences. Because many kinesiology majors choose career paths in healthcare, they may benefit from opportunities that enhance their empathy skills.