

START: Promoting diversity in aging research among college undergraduate students

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INTRODUCTION

- **Diversity** is important in **healthcare and related research** because **representation** that includes the **ethnic values** of our communities insures that patients and research participants are comfortable
- In all areas of healthcare, **ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status plays a role in representation, acceptance, and progress** within and out of the **healthcare setting**
- Every year, the **Student Aging Researchers in Training (START) program** introduces students of **underrepresented backgrounds** to research in order **combat disparities in healthcare and related research.**
- As the growing older adult population becomes more diverse, there is a need for **culturally sensitive perspectives in aging research**
- Despite advancements in the science of aging, **racial/ethnic groups and first-generation college students** are still **underrepresented**

AIM

- The **Student Aging Researchers in Training (START) program** was established at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign to build a culture of research related to aging among **underrepresented undergraduate students**
- This study describes the **assessment of students' aging knowledge** and perceptions of START since its **5-year implementation**

METHODS

Year-round, students participate in academic enrichment training, including work in research labs to gain hands-on research experiences and mentorship.

- Outcomes were evaluated using a **multi methods approach** and analyzed through the software **SPSS Statistics v.26**
- A **focus group** with students and interviews with lab mentors (n=4) were conducted at the end of the first year to learn about their experiences and adapt as appropriate for next cohorts.
- An open-ended **follow-up survey** was conducted with alumni to understand how the program aided their professional development

METHODS

- A **pre-post program survey** was conducted through the online survey tool **Qualtrics** to assess students' knowledge change about aging-related topics and research resources

RESULTS

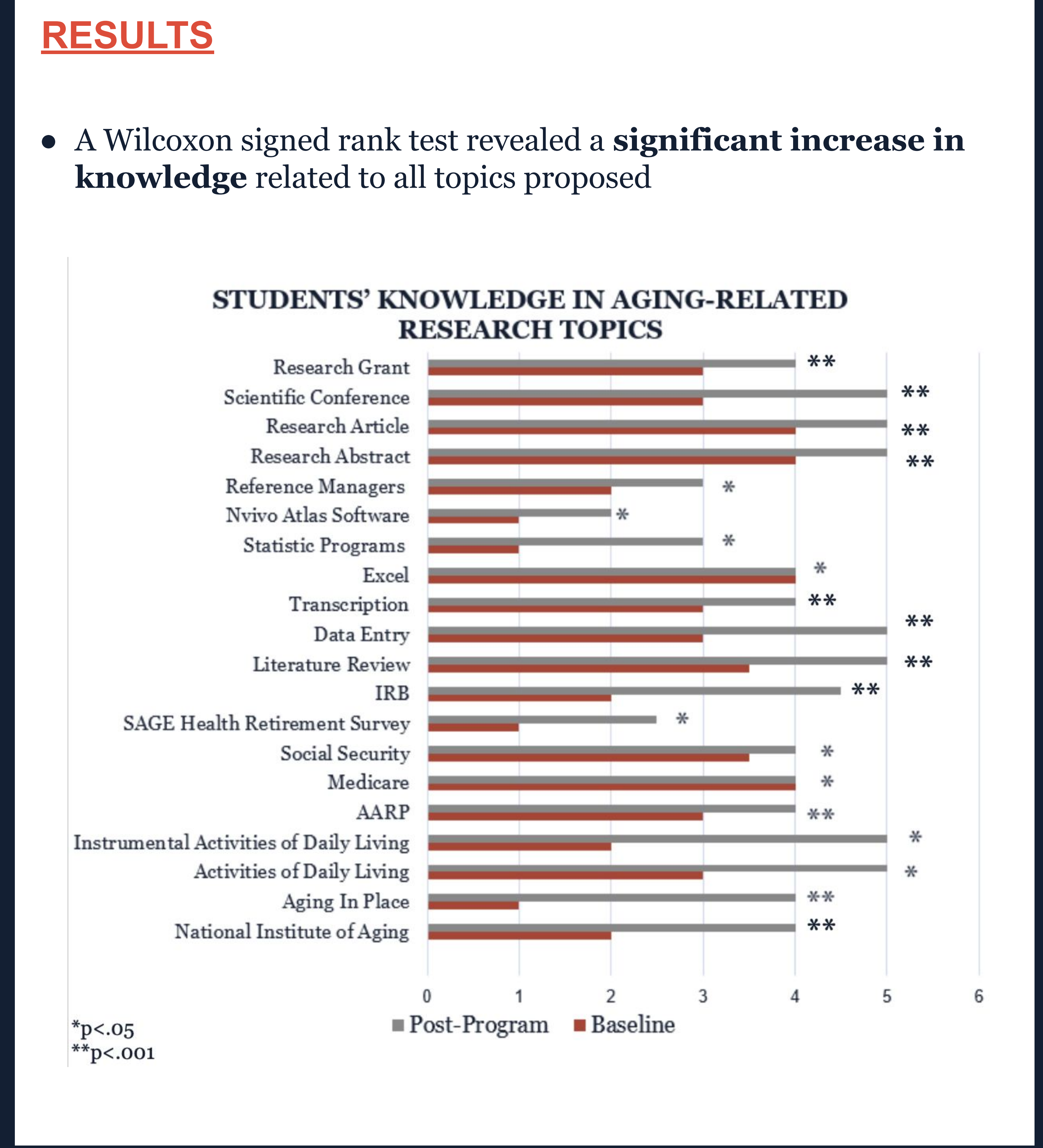
YEAR IN SCHOOL

- Freshman
- Sophomores
- Juniors
- Seniors

RACE/ETHNICITY

- White
- African American
- Asian
- Latinx

- A **total of 66** students (Mean age = 20±1.6) from the College of Applied Health Sciences completed the program
- **76%** continued working in their research labs beyond the year-long program
- Post-graduation, alumni **entered a health-related graduate degree program (82%)** or were **working full-time in clinical research labs (18%)**
- From this survey, many described **feeling empowered** to pursue a research career and perceived that the **program made their applications stand out**
- Focus groups revealed **positive perceptions and experiences** in the program and students saw themselves as **contributing to the field of aging research**
- Mentors described the opportunity to **increase diversity** in their labs as **extremely valuable**



DISCUSSION

- Findings show the importance of research programs such as START that intentionally recruit diverse groups of undergraduate students
- Such initiatives build a **culture of appreciation** for aging research and **increase representation in aging-related fields**
- We can expect that continuing the START program would lead to an **increase in diversity in research practitioners** as alumni are more likely to pursue **higher education** and careers in **research related to healthcare.**

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