

In search of the contemporary definition of “academic leagues” based on the health sciences’ experience

Em busca da definição contemporânea de “ligas acadêmicas” baseada na experiência das ciências da saúde (resumo: p. 17)

A la búsqueda de la definición contemporánea de “ligas académicas” basada en la experiencia del área de la salud (resumen: p. 17)

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continue on page 14

continue on page 14

This study sought a contemporary definition of ‘academic leagues’, based on the experience of 8 ALs in 2 public universities that have campuses in the countryside of the State of Ceará, Brazil. The ALs were equally divided between the undergraduate courses in Nursing and Medicine. Data collection took place in documents, interviews, and field observation and, subsequently, the data obtained underwent content analysis. On the one hand, the risks of adhering to clinical practices and corporate specialism have been shown; on the other hand, student protagonism and the interactions between university teaching, research, and outreach have been as well. The suggested definition of ALs is that they: a) correspond to student groups configured as a regular and longitudinal university outreach program; b) are carried out through direct and indirect professor oversight, relying on intellectual and practical support from the university and the health service network; and c) are oriented towards professional learning and growth around a specific theme provided for in the Brazilian National Curriculum Guidelines for the respective courses.

Keywords: Academic leagues. Higher education. Brazilian National Health System. University outreach. In-service learning.



Introduction

Higher education, according to the Brazilian Law of Guidelines and Bases for the National Education (LDB), includes, among its purposes, encouraging research and scientific investigation work; promoting the dissemination of cultural, scientific, and technical knowledge; stimulating knowledge of contemporary issues – particularly, the national and regional ones; and promoting university outreach, open to the population's participation. To serve these purposes, the law highlights the creation and transmission of culture; the development of the view on the human being and the environment in which she/he lives; the communication of knowledge; and the dissemination of the achievements and benefits resulting from cultural creation and scientific and technological research produced at the institution, in addition to the establishment of a reciprocal relationship with society (LDB, art. 43)¹. Higher education includes, besides undergraduate and graduate education, plans; scientific research programs and projects; artistic works; and university outreach actions. Universities are responsible for programs, courses, and outreach actions open to candidates who meet the requirements established in each case by educational institutions. The university's social responsibility, under the terms of the Brazilian Federal Constitution, is exercised according to the inseparability of teaching, research, and outreach².

In the case of health, the Opinion issued by the Brazilian National Council of Education (CNE) that inaugurates the proposal of Brazilian National Curriculum Guidelines (DCN) recommends the connection between higher education and health, indicating common general competencies for the educational profiles that include health care within (national and international) contemporary references of professional practice in health, stipulating the strengthening of the connection between theory and practice; and appreciating individual and collective research, as well as internships and participation in outreach activities. The inaugural document was published in 2001 and it addresses the field named as "Health: concept, principle, guidelines and objectives." Those later opinions, which included undergraduate courses in health, also reaffirmed the importance of the inseparability between teaching, research, and outreach and the need to safeguard this tripod in the structures of undergraduate courses³.

Regarding the interaction university-society, the 'academic leagues' (ALs) emerge as a possible space for teaching and learning, since they begin to resurface in the midst of university outreach activities. The ALs emerged in Brazil after the creation of the League to Fight Syphilis, in 1920, at the School of Medicine of the University of São Paulo – the name indicates the, above all, hygienist nature. The purpose of this AL was offering free medical care provided by students, who put into practice the knowledge acquired at the university and, in return, they gained experience and learned by having the reality of the services and the population as a basis⁴. The time when the ALs rose coincided with the period of the Brazilian Military Dictatorship⁵, in which, if there were restricted university students' knowledge and questioning, there was also great expectation towards the provision of community services with a clinical nature (serving the nation and serving science, focusing on the provision of technical and scientific actions regardless of the notions of health system, public policies, or citizenship in health).



Despite the origin and predominance of medical specialties, the ALs have been present in other courses in the health field and in other knowledge areas. However, despite almost 100 years since the first AL, the scientific literature on the subject is scarce, something which testifies in favor of an analysis of the instrumentality of its use and the prevalence of medical specialties, either due to affiliation with expert organizations or to the 'altruistic' provision of public health services. In an integrative review conducted by Cavalcante et al.⁶, only 24 articles were found in the Brazilian databases, the majority of which belonging to medical specialties, such as surgery, orthopedics, anesthesiology, psychiatry, and intensive care medicine. Also, published articles addressing this topic did not reach a consensus on the definition and practices of ALs, stating, however, that they would aim at providing students with an opportunity for practical experience and the acquisition of skills in health care, according to the inseparability of care, research, and technical and scientific growth, covering the notion of convergence between teaching, research, and outreach, too. The ALs may introduce themselves as a 'transformative space,' fostering bonds between students, professors, and society, as well as building ties between diverse scenarios of practice and bringing students closer to population segments⁷.

In the ALs, the importance and relevance of extracurricular teaching strategies are recognized, seeing that they address perspectives provided for by law and that meet the expectations of connecting the basic education with research and outreach. Considering the lack of information in the literature on the calling and management of ALs, especially when made available to several professional categories – also incorporating interprofessional practices –, it is worth exploring the definition with which professors and students work. To do this, a case study was taken in the health field, according to the experience in the countryside of the State of Ceará, Northeastern Brazil, where the ALs operate and are offered to undergraduate students in Medicine and Nursing. Thus, this study aimed to systematize a contemporary definition of ALs according to the experience of 8 ALs in 2 public universities, involving 2 of the main courses in the health field.

Paths followed

In view of the building of a contemporary definition of ALs, a case study has proven to be promising⁸. As a basis for conducting the study, a qualitative approach was used, by means of documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and field observation. The study scenario consisted in the Federal University of Ceará (UFC) and the Ceará State University 'Vale do Acaraú' (UVA), more precisely, the 4 ALs of the undergraduate courses in Nursing and the 4 ALs of the undergraduate course in Medicine.

The choice for these 2 courses was due to the fact that they are paradigmatic in health and the oldest ones in the study site. Thus, there was a random selection of 4 Medicine Leagues out of the 17 then active, and the 4 Nursing Leagues active within the data collection period were also included in this study (i.e., an equal number of ALs in each course).



The study participants were 8 professors and 16 students. The professors were the professors' coordinators of the 4 Nursing Leagues and the 4 Medicine Leagues. The participants ('league members') needed to regularly perform activities in ALs for at least 3 months. The league members were undergraduate students, 2 from each league, one of whom was the student's coordinator. To choose the other league members, a random draw was conducted. The data collection period was from August to November 2017.

For the analysis of documents, the internal rules, the project to create the respective leagues, and the most recent public notice of selection for each league were chosen. For the interviews, a semi-structured script was used, with guiding questions about the definition of ALs and their role in students' education. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. For the analysis of documents, a previously systematized guiding script was used. The observation strategy consisted of 3 meetings of each AL, with each observer using a script on the focus of attention to be registered. The data obtained underwent content analysis as proposed by Bardin⁹, which consists of the identification of systematic information for building the inference. Relying on the aid of the software *NVivo 11*, the information from interviews, documents, and field observation was organized, making it possible to categorize data and the analyses.

To protect the participants' identity, as well as their rights to participate in research involving human beings, the provisions of Resolution No. 466/2012, from the Brazilian National Health Council¹⁰ were observed. The project was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of the UVA, being granted the Favorable Opinion No. 2,102,883. All participants signed the Brazilian free and informed consent form (TCLE). All efforts needed were mobilized to minimize possible risks of embarrassment in the field or during the interviews. To safeguard the participants' anonymity, codes relating only to the gathering of each belonging were used, followed by a sequential Roman number.

Characterization of academic leagues

The leagues participating in this study had different periods of existence. The medical ones were created in the years of 2003 – Trauma League –, 2007 – Family and Community Medicine League in Sobral –, 2012 – Academic League of Plastic Surgery in Sobral (LACIPS), and 2013 – Academic League of Otorhinolaryngology and Cervico-Facial Surgery (LOCCF). As for the nursing ones, these started in 2014 – Family Health Nursing League (LESF) –, 2015 – Adolescent Health Promotion League (LIPSA) and Child Health Interdisciplinary League (LISCRI) –, and 2016 – Urgency and Emergency Nursing League (LENUE). As for the organization and operation, all the leagues had a statute, regulating the activities of their members, dealing with rights and duties, composition of the board or coordination, and the respective different positions. Regarding the objectives, most of them were related to one of the pillars of the educational tripod, others gathered 2 or 3 pillars. Objectives related to interdisciplinarity and social mobilization were also found.



The ALs selected may be divided into the Healthcare Networks, such as those of urgency and emergency care and family health; into life cycles, such as those of child health and adolescent health; and into specialties, such as those of trauma, otolaryngology, and plastic surgery, specific to Medicine. All the ALs under study were linked to the universities' outreach pro-rectorates, which are responsible for issuing the participation certificates¹¹. Also, regarding the length of stay, the ALs that were linked to the courses in Medicine did not have a final duration time, i.e. the students enter through a selection process and can remain until the end of their undergraduate course. In the ALs linked to the courses in Nursing, there was a predetermined time ranging from 6 months to 1 year, with no interruption of activities throughout the period. The selection processes in the Medicine Leagues take place according to the need to fill vacancies.

The definition of academic leagues

The fact that the ALs consist in university outreach projects was recurrent in the participants' manifestations and a constant finding in the documents, all of them are linked to the respective outreach pro-rectorates. The ALs were regarded as outreach projects even when they carried out teaching and research activities and had an unlimited duration. University outreach was considered as its pillar of support, playing a role in teaching in terms of deepening both theoretical issues and practical skills; and it improves research, which is guided by development gaps in the theoretical or practical fields during regular teaching hours. The ALs in the health field were defined as outreach projects that stem from the needs of deepening and mastering a certain knowledge area in which, however, gaps in teaching supply or routine learning opportunities are observed, as shown in Figure 1.

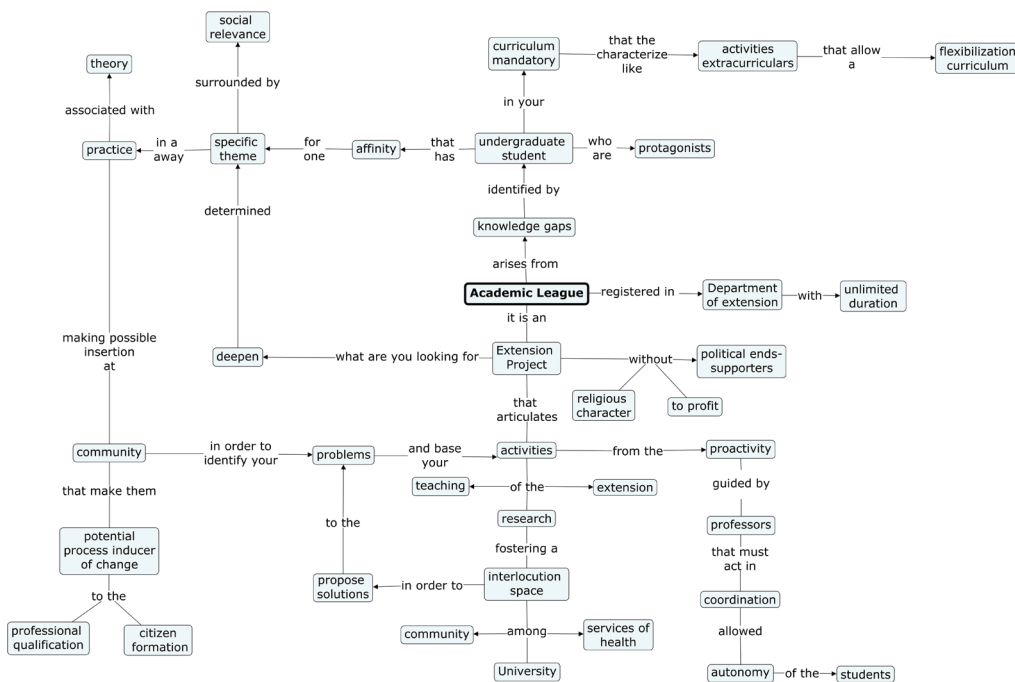


Figure 1. Conceptual map of academic leagues. Sobral, Ceará, Brazil, 2018.
Source: Prepared by the authors.

The link to university outreach is put into question, however, by the statutes of several ALs^{12,13}, since they show this link as a qualification program, not being limited to the notion of outreach activities, something which reveals the longitudinality and continuity of the experience in the ALs. The term ‘outreach groups’ would also not represent the ALs, since their link and organicity between discussion and action is strong. The document prepared by the Forum of Outreach Pro-Rectors of Brazilian Public Universities, which has advised the organization and systematization of university outreach, covers under the concept of outreach project the determination of duration terms, i.e. pre-established duration¹⁴. The ALs, however, have unlimited duration, longitudinal qualification, and continuity of actions.

It is proposed that the Family Health Nursing League – LESF – has unlimited duration and it is a non-religious civil society, with no political party and profit motives. On the other hand, it is proposed to be linked to the Outreach Pro-Rectorate (PROEX) and to the Nursing Course at the Ceará State University ‘Vale do Acaraú.’ (LESF’s Statute)

It is a non-profit entity, with unlimited duration, organized by undergraduate students from the Nursing Course at the Ceará State University *Vale do Acaraú* (UVA) and supported by the course’s Coordination. (LIPSA’s Public Notice)



It is a civil, non-profit, non-partisan, non-religious entity, having unlimited duration and a multiprofessional nature. (LACIPS's Statute)

The main difference of the ALs is student protagonism. This characteristic has been expressed since its inception and it is one of the key elements for meaningful and autonomous learning¹⁵. The ALs' emergence is marked by recognizing any gap in deepening or thickening deemed necessary by the students themselves. They mobilize around a common intervention objective and, from then on, begin the process of building an AL under the professor oversight.

The academic league, it is something that stemmed from students' need, inserted in a certain field, which, in my league is Family Health, and there was a need to, we did not have a significant insertion in the FHP [Family Health Program], know about Family Health, people thought of creating the league, but it goes beyond, it is something that students take the lead and the advising professors also help in this insertion in the territory. (Nurs. Student's Coord. II)

It stemmed from the need of nursing and physical education students to foster knowledge about child health from the physical and psychosocial perspectives, and the theoretico-practical activities involving this population during the undergraduate course are regarded as insufficient, thus, there is no need for taking extracurricular actions to provide prospective practitioners in this area with improved qualification. (LISCRJ Project)

The leagues are student institutions, created and managed by undergraduate students, a major fact for taking actions, within the scope of their projects. And coordinated by an advising professors' coordinator. (LESF's Statute)

Specialization was another characteristic found in ALs, something which must be observed by the professors who oversee them, since undergraduate education should provide a generalist qualification¹⁶ and demonstrate openness to the specialties needed by the world of work within the health system, and not the anticipation of specialties by the world of specialist corporations.

In view of this set of pre-qualifications required by emergency services, it is justified to create a qualification project for nursing students who may be, still as undergraduates, within referral services in urgency and emergency care, improving their technical knowledge and skills. This fact results in the circumstance that when these students graduate, they enter the job market as qualified and specialized workforce in the area. (LENUE Project)



The ALs should not materialize in spaces of early specialization, despite the fact that they are almost always related to a specialty, and not to an area of social intervention or to a coming together of university-society¹⁷. In Medicine, for instance, the ALs usually gather students due to the wish for early adherence to the desired specialty in medical residency and prospective specialized professional practice. It is necessary to prepare, during the undergraduate course, professionals aimed at the national health system, with a comprehensive view of the population's social and regional health needs who can help the sector to provide systemic responses to global issues related to the health-disease-quality of life process.

Opportunities to stimulate students to think and do collaborate with their personal and professional growth, mobilize professional abilities for autonomy, communication, interpretation of reality, and decision-making. Students more engaged in social issues are more receptive to educational changes in higher education and crave strategies that break with the traditional teaching model. The call to action attracts students and entices them to participate in activities that break with the dichotomy theory versus practice¹⁸. Furthermore, according to the students, in the ALs they have an opportunity to exercise the idealized professional practice shown in the classroom, but having reduced contact with users and services.

Yes, I believe that it is the outreach project itself, you know, that provides university education, research, and outreach, associates both practice and theory in the classroom, and this provides so much, it is a matter of improving both the curriculum and the experiences, you know, the person has more experience with certain areas, identify or not that area, so I think that this is it, theory linked to practice. (Nurs. League Members I)

I think it's an opportunity for us to learn things that are... that we don't see that much in practice at college. At least, you know, for Medicine we see the practice much more during the internship. (Med. Student's Coord. I)

This finding requires caution, since it can have a utilitarian or assistentialist view of the population. The intervention scenarios of ALs need to be taken as spaces for improved learning not only of the technique, but also of social reading, ethical growth, respect for the user, understanding of the system, appropriation of health policies, and building of critical interactions between university, society, and health system. Another major characteristic is that, in this research, what marked the ALs' concept was their insertion in the reality of the future world of work: discussing reality allows us to learn in a more meaningful way. Also, the continued and engaged presence of students in services encourages professionals in the workplace to reflect on their own professional practices.

In the meetings that took place, usually once a week, it was observed that the subjects were directed to the planning or analysis of teaching, research, and outreach activities, in addition to a discussion about some action that the league members took in the scope of the various health services. Some meetings were related to theoretical alignment on a specific theme important for taking other actions in the ALs participating in this study.



Moreover, there were bureaucratic meetings related to discussions about participants' attendance, public notice of selection, internal rules, among other subjects.

ALs also allow the emergence of collective work: students begin to work in teams and along with various social actors; and they get in touch with students and professionals from different categories, with users and with managers of the services and/or territories in which they carry out their activities. This exercise, based on the encouragement of interprofessional education during the undergraduate course, encourages the adoption of collaborative practices (and praxis) in professional practice. Collaborative action among students allows the sharing of common and specific skills that are important for prospective professional practice¹⁹.

A major dimension related to ALs was the intersection between the education and professionalization processes in the search of solutions to real problems, as highlighted by Silva and Flores⁷. The ALs are characterized as complementary activities that allow flexible qualification and do not have a focus on a financial, service provision, or scholarship perspective: the objective has been to improve students' education. The ALs correspond to contemporary models to the so-called active methodologies, such as project-based learning, team-based learning, situated training, in-service learning, learning communities, among others, being a thorough way to relate teaching, knowledge, and what and how to do, processing realities in action and activating creation through exchange²⁰.

The inseparability of theory and practice, as well as between teaching, research, and outreach, is highlighted in the ALs' proposal²¹ and it seems to be exemplified not only by the defense of the best professional qualification of undergraduate students, but also of civic education, starting from the implication and commitment to the realities and to the necessary educational changes in the health field. Nevertheless, this inseparability appears as a goal to be pursued in the actions taken by the ALs, in order not to be restricted to the statutes and internal rules, as a utopia to be reached.

University outreach as a key pillar of academic leagues

Based on research, it may be said that the ALs could be one of the strategies to implement the university's social responsibility²², according to the dialogue between outreach, teaching, and research; and relying on the potential to be managed by students and for students, in line with the documents issue by the Family Health Nursing League and the Urgency and Emergency Nursing League:

[...] the building of a league is based on a theme surrounded by social relevance. The leagues are based on problems of the community in which they are inserted, identifying and identifying them, in order to help proposing solutions. (LESF's Statute)

[...] should aim at the community, as well as at the undergraduate students involved. (LENUE Project)



According to the manifestation of students and professors from the Nursing and Medicine Leagues:

[...] the league, for me, really is an innovative project, you know, both for the university and for the students themselves. We learn a lot, through it we can work in the three areas, i.e. teaching, research, and outreach. We also live with the community, you know, it's closer. It allows us to know what the community really needs, where we can intervene and, in this way, we try to improve, you know, improve what we realize to be wrong. (Nurs. Student's Coord. III)

[...] first, an opportunity for learning and experience, both in teaching and research and outreach, you know. It sounds cliché, but it is for real. That's exactly what works. (Med. Prof. III)

The interesting thing about the ALs is that students are driven by the disquiet of problems that they face when they are inserted in the reality of health services and the populations with which they are taking their actions. Studies must be carried out to learn more about this reality or to propose solutions to problems identified *in situ*. Teaching is an opportunity to improve knowledge on a specific theme of the AL, which has a close relationship with the population or network of services in which they will act as practitioners.

If, on the one hand, many students do not know what university outreach really means, insisting on an assistentialist view¹⁷, on the other hand, they learn through questioning reality, social criticism, problematization and, mainly, contact with the Brazilian National Health System (Sistema Único de Saúde [SUS]), and the population. They recognize that health services are teaching and learning territories and that it is necessary to break with the concept of university outreach as a mere space for dissemination of knowledge and diffusion of cultural events or assistentialism and/or service provision²³:

[...] the academic league, for me, is the combination of teaching, research, and outreach knowledge, what we can share with undergraduate students is kind of an outreach initiative involving what we experience in college, trying to improve our deficit, i.e. we have a lot of classes, but since the very first semester we say "I want outreach, I want outreach, I want outreach," and I think that the leagues are providing a lot of this, this opportunity. [...] most leagues now have a selection process since the first semester, the very first or the second one! (Nurs. Student's Coord. IV)



It is a potential inducer of change processes in professional qualification, constituting a space for dialogue between the university, the community, and the health service based on outreach and research, something which strengthens the 'humanization spirit' and implies directly and indirectly the reality change processes. (LESF's Statute)

The academic leagues aim to take measures that help solving the problems of the community in which they are inserted, by taking teaching, research, and outreach actions. From this perspective, such student entities would work by taking into account not only the scientific interests of professors and researchers at the university, but also the social interests of the population. (Otorhino's Statute)

In order to overcome the utilitarian view of the population, research can play a major role in expanding education to meet actual social needs. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that students and professors must appreciate the population's knowledge, recognizing and considering them in health care. Popular education, inserted in the qualification of health professionals, allows us to recognize the previous knowledge both of students and the very population that these students will provide with care later, in a dynamics of appreciating the knowledge and interests of students and the population²⁴.

The history of the ALs recognizes them as potential spaces for deploying university outreach¹⁷ and it is in line with the Brazilian National Education Plan (Plano Nacional de Educação [PNE]), which requires that at least 10% of the undergraduate curricular credits are allocated to outreach²⁵.

The challenging role of professors as learning mediators in the academic leagues and student protagonism on the scene

Professors' role in ALs consists in facilitating/mediating learning. A professor must provide practical, theoretical, and pedagogical support in the ALs; mobilize students; and encourage them to learn through their practical and social insertion:

[...] the professor, she/he is there as a support different from what I experienced as an undergraduate student in an outreach project, where we arrived at the meeting, the professor said what was going to happen. In the leagues I see a division of tasks, we have a student responsible for finance, for outreach, for research – in the case of ours, a person who organizes scales. So I see students much more proactive in the league than in an outreach project, you know, I think the difference between a league and an outreach project could be this: active participation of students. (Nurs. Prof. I)



The ethico-political commitment of professors contributes to build a more meaningful learning^{18,26}, as well as their ability to connect theory and practice, ethics and technique, and their competence and ability to relate contribute to charm and raise awareness among students. They must serve, then, as a set in which one relates dialogically with the other so that co-responsibility exists in teaching and learning processes.

The ALs allow for a break with the traditional teaching model and with the characteristic hierarchy between students and professors. A professor has no ascending place over students and he becomes the member who, despite having more experience, learns along with the student. The latter is encouraged to increase her/his autonomy by having her/his proactivity as a basis. Here, the imagery of the professor as "owner of the specialist chair" and the students as "disciples of the specialist chair" vanish.

Students organize their activities based on the learning needs they encounter when faced with the reality in which they are inserted:

[...] the academic league, for me, is a project that goes beyond, there the student has a relative freedom, she/he can act more and not necessarily deals with a professor always interfering directly, she/he has a relative independence and this ends up being good and bad at the same time, you know. We end up doing things, we end up standing out even more, doing things in a more independent manner. (Nurs. Student's Coord. III)

[...] the difference is the students' protagonism. The professors, they are supporters, but what is interesting about the league is this creation. There is a sense of responsibility, without waiting. Not having that passivity. They take this role themselves. (Nurs. Prof. II)

The improvement of skills is important so that students sharpen their creativity when building solutions to real problems. It was found that students become decision makers, in addition to exercising teamwork, something which provides experience in dealing with conflicts of pedagogical relevance. The professors' role, however, is not always effective, and this can weaken the operation and effectiveness of the ALs²⁷. In the ALs under study, there were cases in which the advising professors were not present, being only a means to reach the ALs' registration at the educational institution, with no participation in the organization and meetings:

[...] in this case, the coordinator is not as effective in the league. (Med. League Member I)

[...] the advising professor, she/he is not always so present in the project, for instance, but this varies from advising professor to advising professor... but, at the same time, sometimes we feel that need for guidance, often we are in a project and there is no indication of what to do, how to do it and, apart from that, this is complicated for a student, you know, having no professor's guidance. (Nurs. Student's Coord. III)



Professors need to self-assess their role and their commitment to students. A professor's self-assessment enables the improvement of pedagogical practices and, consequently, of the teaching-learning process²⁸. When she/he accepts to coordinate an AL, a professor also accepts the responsibility for carrying out its activities, especially that of supporting student learning. The professors recalled that they did not experience this format of activity during their undergraduate courses and that they often learn about the operation and management of the ALs along with the demanding students:

[...] unless we had special training to be in the league in a specific outreach project. (Med. Prof. I)

[...] it was a challenge for me, because in my time at the academy there was no league, just an outreach project. (Nurs. Prof. I)

[...] I had never been part of a league, I didn't know how it works, I came to know it, I'm learning along with them, you know, I had never been part of a league. (Nurs. Prof. III)

Professors and students learn and work together. They learn to operate and experience the AL collectively. The professors' lack of preparation also reveals the university's weakness when it comes to outreach, a lack of preparation that may reflect detachment from the need to update the ways of teaching and investigating at the university.

Conclusion

Based on the study, belonging to 2 public universities regarded as important – 1 federal and 1 state institutions –, both with campuses in the countryside of the State of Ceará, a region where social and regional needs are apparent, a characteristic of Northeastern Brazil, these ALs may be defined as undergraduate student groups organized under direct and indirect professor oversight as a regular longitudinal university outreach program, with intellectual and practical support from the university and the service network; and being driven by learning and scientific, technological, and political development of a specific theme contained in the respective alumni profile provided for and documented in the DCN.

The ALs, which prioritize the knowledge and professional domains that the world of work need and/or the performance in a specific profession aimed at meeting social needs, represent complementary teaching activities and are consistent with the Brazilian higher education legislation. Also, the ALs are aligned to the national proposal for university outreach and they offer opportunities for applied research, engagement in university research groups, in groups aimed at research, development, and innovation regarding methodologies, and in social action groups. The ALs, in the health field, connect the university and society, as well as the local, regional, and national health systems.



Despite being often configured as particular outreach projects, specific intervention projects of certain research groups or exceptional teaching *loci* – as a scenario for practice, internship, curricular internship, or undergraduate experience – the ALs are a face of university social responsibility and co-responsibility between professors and students, belonging to a theme, interconnecting teaching, research, and outreach; connecting theories and practices; enabling the sharing of knowledge and skills; and bridging the learning gaps in strategic fields regarding the provision of personnel in the health system, either under the aspects of clinical care, management, assessment, or continued health education.

The definition of AL extracted from this study allows students and professors to propose, conduct, or deploy such an initiative; and ask for resources, covenants, and partnerships not only in Medicine, but also in the other undergraduate courses in health sciences and in interprofessional education projects. Such a definition can also contribute to the regulation and control of ALs; to the emergence of policies encouraging their creation, remodeling, or extinction; to the preparation of leaders; and to prospect innovations in university-society interactions, bringing limited or fragmented modalities to an end.

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Authors' contributions

All authors actively participated in all stages of preparing the manuscript.



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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Este estudo buscou uma definição contemporânea de Ligas Acadêmicas, segundo a experiência de oito Ligas em duas universidades públicas com *campus* no interior do estado do Ceará. As Ligas estavam igualmente divididas entre os cursos de graduação em Enfermagem e em Medicina. A coleta de dados ocorreu em documentos, entrevistas e observações e, posteriormente, foi realizada análise de conteúdo. Foram evidenciados, de um lado, os riscos da adesão a práticas assistencialistas e ao especialismo corporativo; e, de outro, o protagonismo estudantil e as interações entre ensino, pesquisa e extensão. Sugere-se como definição de Ligas que elas correspondem a coletivos estudantis configurados como programa regular longitudinal de extensão universitária, efetivadas mediante supervisão docente direta e indireta, sob apoio intelectual e prático da universidade e da rede de serviços de saúde, estando orientadas à aprendizagem e ao desenvolvimento profissional em torno de um tema específico previsto nas Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais do(s) curso(s).

Palavras-chave: Ligas acadêmicas. Educação superior. Sistema Único de Saúde. Extensão universitária. Aprendizagem em serviço.

Este estudio buscó una definición contemporánea de Ligas Académicas según la experiencia de ocho Ligas en dos universidades públicas con *campus* en el interior del Estado de Ceará, región nordeste de Brasil. Las Ligas estaban igualmente divididas entre los cursos de graduación de enfermería y en medicina. La colecta de datos se realizó mediante documentos, entrevistas y observaciones y, posteriormente, se realizó el Análisis de Contenido. Por un lado, se pusieron en evidencia, los riesgos de la adhesión a prácticas asistencialistas y el especialismo corporativo; por otro, el protagonismo estudiantil y las interacciones entre enseñanza, investigación y extensión. Se sugiere como definición de Ligas que éstas correspondan a grupos de estudiantes configurados como un programa regular longitudinal de extensión universitaria, efectuado a través de la supervisión directa e indirecta del profesorado, bajo el apoyo intelectual y práctico de la universidad y de la red de servicios de salud, estando orientadas al aprendizaje y desarrollo profesional en torno a un tema específico previsto en las Directrices Curriculares Nacionales de la(s) asignatura(s).

Palabras clave: Ligas académicas. Educación superior. Sistema Brasileño de Salud. Extensión universitaria. Aprendizaje en servicio.