Applying Partnership Design in the Development of Continuing Education Curriculum for Professional Social Workers

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Abstract

This article will discuss the establishment of a "partnership" of two State of Wisconsin regions (northern and western); thirty-four county human service agencies; the University of Wisconsin Department of Social Work; and the Continuing Education unit on the same campus: the Community-Based Services Training Partnership for Adults (CBSTP). The partnership's purpose is to develop a carefully researched and designed curriculum training module that is outcome-based, practice-oriented, and designed to improve the quality of services to vulnerable adults living in northern and western rural Wisconsin. The article explores efforts at current program identification and problem solving, the establishment of an advisory board representing the state and county members, methodology, and funding initiatives. The final product of this initiative will be a manual that will include all aspects of the training curriculum.

Historical Overview

Wisconsin has had a strong history of professionals work ing together to meet the needs of "at-risk" populations. An at-risk individual is "vulnerable to specific problems, although such problems have yet to surface" *(DuBois and Krogsrud Miley 2002, 66).* In the recent past, the University of Wisconsin System and state and county employees working in child and family service areas had joined together to implement a child and family service curriculum. University-based providers of such training received on going funding from Title IV of the Social Security Act funneled through the state.

In June 1999, staff from University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire in the Department of Social Work and the Continuing Education unit, the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, and various representative northern and western county departments

of human services/departments of social services gathered together in an effort to address unmet needs of adult clients and the continuing education needs of the social workers who serve "rural impoverished and sparsely populated communities." The people from the state and county government agencies were in supervisory or administrative positions and brought with them a brief outline of what might constitute a core knowledge and skills base for service providers.

When the original members from University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire Department of Social Work, Continuing Education, and county and state adult service workers met, all parties recognized the need for training practice similar to that provided for child welfare workers. They noted that services for vulnerable adults, educational and peer networking opportunities for social workers, and decreasing financial allocations had made caring for the vulnerable adult ever more challenging. All parties committed to establishing themselves as a permanent group and to initiating the process of development of best-practice training opportunities for workers serving adult clients. An advisory group representing the county and state employees was established to assist and advise the university staff in the development of the mission and goals of this body.

Concurrent with the advent of this partnership, Wisconsin Department of Regulation and Licensing implemented its first continuing education requirement for the four different levels of state-certified social workers. Provision of the core curriculum and specific emphasis areas, such as developmental disabilities, would not only update social worker skills but provide a low-cost, efficient means for employees to accumulate the thirty continuing education hours that they were now required to earn every two years.

Mission and Objectives

The first step was to define the group and determine its mission and objectives. The advisory board discussed three different terms in an effort to select a name that would describe their purpose: alliance, coalition, and partnership. *Alliance,* which is defined as a bond connection, or "association to further the common interests of the members"[1] and *coalition,* which is defined as "a temporary union of distinct parties, persons, or states for joint action," did not clarify the group's perceived long-term affiliation. The term *partnership* was selected because it implies a long-term, legal, mutually beneficial association of distinct groups with a shared and select

[1]Definitions from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary,* 10th edition.

purpose. A partnership "usually involves a close cooperation between parties having specified and joint rights and responsibilities." It is important for any body of constituents to identify the exact nature of affiliation to further educate both members and nonmembers.

The largest proportion of Wisconsin's total population is located in the southern half of the state. Social workers from the northern and western regions generally had to travel three to six hours to receive training and education services. This was time-consuming for staff and an additional expense for the employing agency. Community-based training became a goal; to achieve it, Community-Based Service Training Partnership for Adults (CBSTP) was formed.

To become a true partnership the union needed legal standing as such, with an identified specific mission, goals, objectives, and a permanency of members and member duties and responsibilities. The first step for county human service and social service departments was writing a formal letter indicating their support of CBSTP. These letters became the basis for the establishment of the informal agreement between the advisory board and the university.

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The mission also needed to be formally established and written. The mission, from the perspective of the advisory board and university staff, was to identify the education and training needs of the professionals and to write the initial core course curriculum needed to fulfill those needs. Advisory committee members and university staff bring various backgrounds, skills, and employment experiences. They often see the goals and mission from various viewpoints and through their diversity, multiple levels of needs and logistical and financial impediments were recognized. Feedback from county workers, state administrators, and university personnel has been one of the most beneficial aspects of the growth of CBSTP. Support and cooperation continues to guide CBSTP and its mission. From this spirit of cooperation and talents of all the members, the advisory board and staff at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire developed a mission statement and a proposed model for a core curriculum (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:   Proposed Core Curriculum and Possible Future Emphasis**

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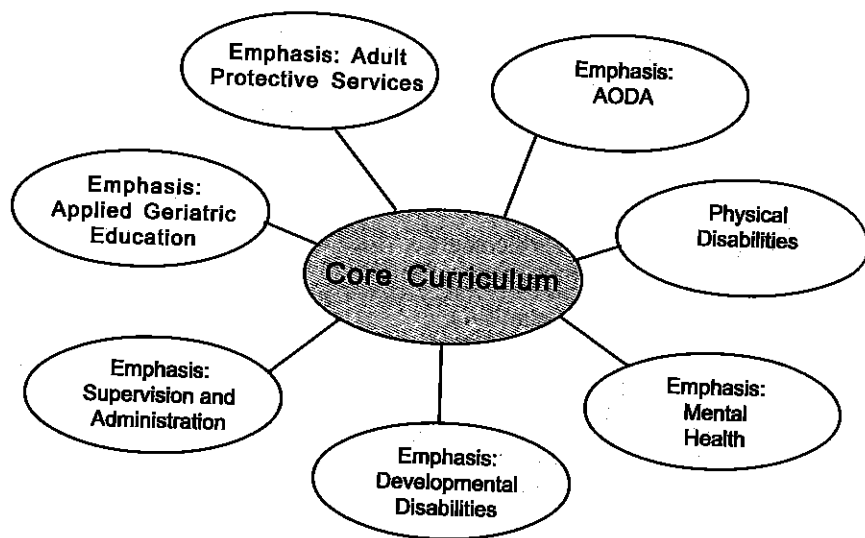
The current mission of the Community-Based Service Training Partnership is to: provide collaboration between and among the partners and curriculum development designed to meet the educational needs of social workers to better serve adult clients. CBSTP fosters collaboration between and among the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire Continuing Education, University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire Department of Social Work, Northern and Western Regions of Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, and 34 western and northern counties of Departments of Human Service/Social Service/51.42 and 51.437 Boards. CBSTP provides human service workers in northern and western Wisconsin with best practice based educational training and programs that focus on the professional needs of those who serve the frail elderly and adults and who struggle with alcohol and other drug abuse, cognitive and developmental disorders, physical disabilities, mental illness, and abuse/neglect by self or others. *(University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire Continuing Education 2002).*

All parties to the partnership agreed that continuing education should begin immediately even though funding for any major

Figure 2: CBSTP Geographical Area (shaded section)
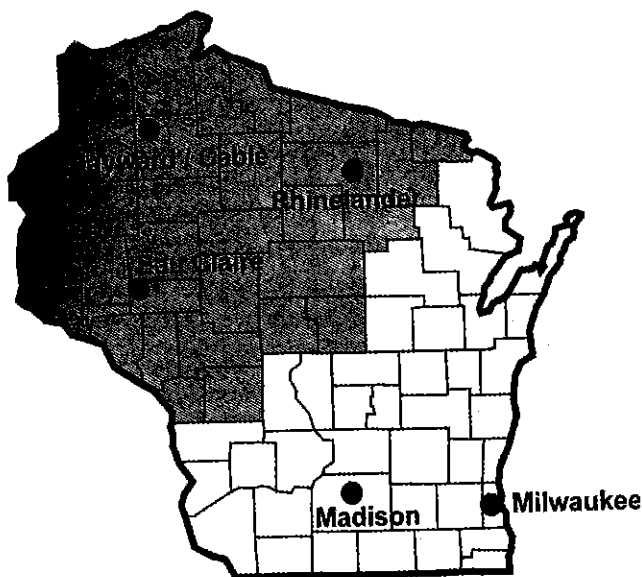
Communities where CBSTP trainings are held:
- Eau Claire
- Rhinelander
- Hayward/Cable

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planned series or core curriculum did not exist. To keep the partnership viable and visible, three to five workshops were presented annually on a cost-recovery basis. Because the partnership wanted the continuing education to be community focused, three disparate sites across northern and western Wisconsin were used for the training (see Figure 2). Typically, the same course instructor would be at one site for a day and then travel to the second or third site after the presentation. In this way, cost was also reduced because travel time and overtime were negligible.

Objectives were written (see Table 1). These objectives had to be flexible to meet the changing needs of CBSTP as it evolves from development of methodologies to finalizing the curriculum and establishment of the program. The objectives help guide planning and program development. CBSTP has written an impact study to reflect outcome results from each training. The outcomes

Table 1. Objectives of Community-Based Service Training Partnership

1. Establish principles of best practice for professionals serving adults and children with special needs that are replicable for all professionals serving this population.

2. Identify and provide professional programs/trainings on current research and practice for human service workers.

3. Develop a model curriculum that will enhance the educational needs of human service employees.
   a. Select qualified staff and volunteers to assist with curriculum development.
   b. Manage grant monies in a fiscally sound manner.

4. Author a manual that will serve as a guide for training.

5. Provide professional programs/trainings that are delivered by highly qualified, professional speakers/educators.

6. Provide professional programs/trainings in multiple locations in the western and northern regions of Wisconsin.

7. Provide professional programs/trainings that are at the lowest cost possible and yet maintain fiscal responsibility.

8. Establish an ongoing outcome-based evaluation of the execution of project goals, objectives, and core curriculum programs/trainings.

9. Provide professional programs that meet the continuing education guidelines and requirements set by the Department of Regulation and Licensing for certified social workers.

10. Support and attend professional programs/trainings by CBSTP county members.

11. Maintain an opportunity for an advisory committee to be able to network so that ideas can be shared and relevant, cost-effective programs, supported.

demonstrate benefits to the professionals attending the training and thus, indirectly, make a difference in the lives of the clients and families these professionals serve.

An initial impact study/outcome report was conducted on a single CBSTP program in spring 2002. The program, Psychotropic Drugs: Treatment Issues for the Adult Client, focused on the various medications and other therapy alternatives that are often prescribed

to adult clients. An impact study was conducted through the use of a questionnaire completed by program participants both immediately after the program and through a phone contact questionnaire conducted three months later. The results were submitted to the University of Wisconsin Extension. Part of that report noted:

> Of the 70 respondents to the question whether or not clients would benefit by what was learned, 89% felt their clients would benefit significantly or somewhat. Only 11% felt there would be little or no benefit to their clients. Eighty-seven percent of the participants could specifically list, when asked, two to three new knowledge or skills learned at the workshop. At three months follow-up 100% felt their clients had benefited significantly or somewhat because of what was learned *(Brandt 2002)*.CBSTP will use impact studies like this one to help determine whether the curriculum and various training programs are beneficial to both the professionals and the clients and families they serve.

Application to Other Partnerships in Education, Health, and Social Services

CBSTP has learned that for a consortium of allied but disparate groups working on a common goal, more than a shared mission statement with particular goals is necessary. Several identifiable concepts or skills need to be monitored. Each is listed below and could be used by other groups working on similar projects.

- Audience needs require regular assessment, with the curriculum being revised accordingly.
- Unique features of geography or audience may necessitate specific adaptations, such as repeating the training at three different sites.
- The role of fiscal constraints on all parties needs to be fully shared; the realities of county budget cuts contrasted with the university's continuing education unit's function in the provision of at least cost-recovery programming.
- The role of advisory board members, creation of assessment instruments, awareness of the nature and extent of diversity (cultural, racial, ethnic, worldview, etc.) in client load and identification of programming needs are crucial to success.
- Constant attention to primary, secondary, or other audiences needs to be maintained. This partnership, for example, was set up mainly for social workers from public agencies, but review

of any roster of attendees demonstrated that half of the enrollees were from the private sector. The advisory board had to make programming decisions to accommodate this secondary audience while focusing on the needs of the primary initial audience.

- Continuing Education staff made concerted efforts to dialogue with private, state, and national interested parties as consultants or presenters. Likewise, communication reduced the risk of duplication.
- E-mail discussion lists became a cost-effective, efficient means for the advisory board members to communicate between face-to-face meetings and for the university Continuing Education personnel to advertise to county human service directors and supervisors.
- A key authoritative figure from one of the disparate groups is necessary to keep the group and its members focused and productive.
- Knowledge of the role of requirements such as agency certification, accreditation body requirements, and state mandates is crucial.

Steps in Developing a Core Curriculum

As mentioned previously, the State of Wisconsin continuing education certification requirements and the need to provide effective service and care to at-risk adults require that professional human service workers continually acquire new research, knowledge, and practice skills. Today, CBSTP provides human service workers in northern Wisconsin with best practice-based educational training and programs that focus on the professional needs of those who serve adults who struggle with alcohol and other drug abuse, cognitive and developmental disorders, trauma, physical disabilities, mental illness, and abuse or neglect by self or others. Participants at these programs can look to CBSTP for reliable, cost-effective, content-rich training. These programs also meet state continuing education requirements. Concurrent with the presentation of regular trainings, the advisory board and university staff initiated efforts toward identification and consolidation of what constituted a "core" curriculum.

Several methods, both qualitative and quantitative, have been used to help determine what topics and issues are at the forefront for needed training and education. In the first year of CBSTP the advisory board identified, from their own knowledge and experience, key issues and concerns facing their direct practice staff. The board acted as its own focus group to discuss and identify key areas for

educational training needs. After discussion, members picked targeted areas of program integrity/professional integrity, case management (coordination and linkage), delivery systems, skill building, and specialized emphasis areas. Under each target area they identified specific training topics and potential consultants and curriculum writers who could develop such training.

The advisory board then developed a needs assessment. This was given to 144 social workers in northern and western Wisconsin whose client load was primarily adults. This needs assessment was designed after the Individual Training Needs Assessment model (ITNA). ITNA is an instrument that helps pinpoint the professional's core competencies (attitude, knowledge, and skill), which are the foundation for community-based service practice. The Institute for Human Services (see web page: <http://www.ihs-trainet.com/ Pages/IHS.html>) originally developed ITNA for the

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Child Welfare League of America for Human Services, Columbus, Ohio. Many programs use this approach. The NEW Partnership's ITNA for child welfare workers was based on the one just mentioned along with one used by the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Competency-Based Training and Certificate Program. The Institute for Human Services had developed an initial list of competencies for workers dealing predominantly with adults. That effort was reviewed, expanded, and revised by the CBSTP Advisory Board. Results of this assessment provided a baseline of information about worker's existing competencies, as well as indicators of what training might be useful to increase mastery of the foundation competencies. Table 2 is an example of one core curriculum category.

Results were tabulated in a systemic manner, as originally designed by the Institute for Human Services, that revealed both the level of importance to the professional filling out the assessment form and the level of mastery the professional identified on the topic being evaluated. This data was then incorporated into the original core proposals that were first developed by the advisory board.

Finally, since the beginning of CBSTP, University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire Continuing Education has offered select education programs to meet the needs of social workers and other human service professionals on topics of current interest. The advisory board

Table 2. Individual Training Needs Assessment (ITNA)

CORE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS	Non-Training Barrier to Performance (Check)	Exceptional Skill	Acceptable Skill	Needs to Improve	Cannot Do	Level of Importance: 3=Very 2=Moderately 1=Minor 0=None	SCORE
Community-Based Services: Legal *The long-term care professional:*							
0-1 Knows the definitions of adult abuse, neglect exploitation, incapacity, and incompetence, and knows how to use these when determining the need for protective services.		0	1	2	3	X	
0-2 Understands the role of the court system in adult services and adult protection.		0	1	2	3	X	
0-3 Knows how federal, state, and civil laws regarding guardianship, protective payee, power of attorney, commitment processes, and conservatorship can be used to assist and protect adult clients.		0	1	2	3	X	
-4 Understands Wisconsin's competency criteria and probate process and knows the importance of documentation to support a claim of incompetence or incapacity.		0	1	2	3	X	
-5 Understands legal issues related to exploitation, fraud, confidentiality, and worker liability.		0	1	2	3	X	
-6 Knows his/her role in court; knows applicable rules of evidence; is able to prepare testimony; and can testify appropriately in court hearings.		0	1	2	3	X	
-7 Knows signs and symptoms of abuse/self-abuse, neglect/self-neglect, or exploitation of adults and knows when and how to refer a case for protective service investigation and intervention. The worker knows the possible need for commitment because of danger to self or others.		0	1	2	3	X	

Scoring for Core 100: Add scores together, divide by 7 = Composite Score: _____

suggested topics, and then programs centering on these topics were held in three sites across northern and western Wisconsin. These programs were supported through participant fees and were located in the communities in which the clients and workers live (see Figure 1). All program attendees were given program evaluations to complete. Program attendees were viewed as "key stakeholders" in this educational endeavor. Two programs—Ethics and Boundaries, and Social Work and the Law—were used to gather more information on the educational needs of those attending. Participants were asked to provide information on the type of programs and educational training needed for better job performance. These results were also incorporated into the core proposal in a similar fashion to the ITNA results.

These three methods of needs assessment collection—advisory board recommendation, ITNA study, and key stakeholder recommendations—became the first stages in the development of the core curriculum. At this date, the advisory board, in conjunction with the newly hired project director, and staff at the university are starting the process of developing a core curriculum that will provide quality, up-to-date courses for social workers in the field of adult care.

Funding Process

The advisory board and university staff realized early on that to successfully accomplish the mission and objectives, substantial financial support was needed. Money would be needed to hire skilled curriculum writers, train trainers of the curriculum, and hire a project director to oversee this process. In-kind support had been provided through the advisory board. The need for this curriculum was seen as high priority by advisory board members. County, state, and university advisory board members continue to meet on work time to provide their expertise and assistance.

The next step was to secure funding to pay for curriculum writers and experts in the area of adult service. Funding requests were based on CBSTP mission and objectives in an effort to secure funds that would be complementary to the existing objectives. Numerous grants were written to demonstrate how the funds for this project would support the collaborative effort to develop a curriculum for social workers serving primarily rural, impoverished, and vulnerable adults. Grant applications always included the letters of support that were originally written by the county human service and social service department directors.

In December 2000, the first grant was awarded to CBSTP. The Otto Bremer Foundation provided $35,000 to be used "to support a collaboration that will develop and implement continuing education for Wisconsin county social workers" *(Otto Bremer Foundation 2000).* This grant has been helpful in paying for materials, travel, and resources.

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In May 2002, a congressionally authorized grant for $213,000 was awarded. This grant made it possible for CBSTP to hire a part-time project director and begin the process of looking for qualified writers of curriculum. In July 2002 the project director was hired. CBSTP drafted its first brochure and steps are now under way to put the "dream" and the hard work of initial planning into reality. CBSTP members plan to have the core curriculum implemented by 2005.

Future Goals and Conclusion

It is the long-term objective of CBSTP to develop a curriculum manual. This manual would be available for professionals to use in their respective counties. It also could serve as a model for other counties or states that are seeking a plan to provide continuing education to social workers serving adult clients.

Outcomes-based results will be compiled for all the programs and core training. CBSTP wants to know that the programs and educational trainings will benefit the professionals and the clients they serve. It is important that social workers be able to transfer learned knowledge from the classroom into the workplace.

Providing professional training to social workers cost effectively and in their own communities provides not only the tools to improve their skills, but validates the hard work these professionals put into this often difficult but needy population. Community-Based Service Training Partnership is a win-win program for both professionals and the vulnerable, at-risk adults living in rural, impoverished northern and western Wisconsin communities.

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