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Creating an Interdisciplinary Human Services Program

Nicole Kras

Abstract

The field of human services is interdisciplinary in nature. Creating an interdisciplinary human services program provides college faculty the opportunity to present students with a variety of perspectives and encourages them to make meaningful connections between disciplines. This case example provides an illustration of how a small college created an interdisciplinary human services program.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increase in interdisciplinary programs in higher education (Stone, Bollard, & Harbor, 2009), and this approach to program design is common in the field of human services. In fact, human services has been described as “uniquely approaching the objective of meeting human needs through an interdisciplinary knowledge base” (National Organization for Human Services, 2016, para. 1). There are several strengths of an interdisciplinary perspective in program design, such as showing students how to move beyond disciplinary boundaries and demonstrating “an increase in flexibility and innovation when dealing with complex issues” (Stone, Bollard, & Harbor, 2009, p. 323). These strengths can be of great significance when preparing human services students for their future careers.

Designing a successful interdisciplinary program requires faculty collaboration and a strong leader who can facilitate this collaboration (Stone, Bollard, & Harbor, 2009). When adopting this approach, it is important that all faculty involved support and work together on a shared program vision. Some components of interdisciplinary programs may include team teaching, developing an intellectual community focused on interdisciplinarity, and offering a pedagogy aimed at achieving collaboration (Spelt, Biemans, Tobi, Luning, & Mulder, 2009). The following is a case example of how the faculty and administration at a small college in Connecticut designed an interdisciplinary human services program.

Case Example

The mission of our human services program is to take an interdisciplinary approach to educating and preparing students for their careers. We believe taking an interdisciplinary approach is important because students will be working in various locations and with diverse populations. By taking this approach, we can expose students to a variety of perspectives and experiences in the field of human services. The partnership between departments and faculty demonstrates to the students the importance of collaboration between professionals in order to meet the needs of the individuals they serve. This relationship also provides various faculty perspectives from their areas of expertise. Since we are a small college, it also provides us the opportunity to work with larger departments that offer other degree programs. The following are some ways that our program is embracing an interdisciplinary approach.

The bachelor degree human services students take general education and human services courses, as well as directed electives in psychology, sociology, and criminal justice. The faculty

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and academic advisors work with students to focus on specific areas of interest that will benefit them in their human services careers. Students in the bachelor's degree program also have the option of selecting one of three concentrations: criminal justice, community health, or development.

The criminal justice concentration draws upon courses focusing on corrections, juvenile justice, correctional counseling, and legal rights of victims. The general curriculum, plus these courses, prepare students to work in careers related to probation or corrections and residential/non-residential treatment facilities. These courses are taught by professors with backgrounds in law, law enforcement, and corrections.

The community health and outreach concentration prepares students to work at organizations that focus on community health services such as dental care, diabetes education, preventative screenings, and women's health. Courses in this concentration focus on community health, holistic approaches, nutrition, marketing, and health psychology. These courses are taught by nutritionists, professionals in the health care field, and psychologists.

The concentration in development prepares students to manage human services organizations and focuses on organizational development and fundraising. Courses offered in this concentration focus on management, marketing, grant writing, and fundraising. These courses are taught by business professionals.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach to designing our human services program aligns with The Council for Standards in Human Service Education (CSHSE, 2013) standards for general program characteristics and curriculum. For example, the bachelor degree standards ask for a description of the program's interdisciplinary approach to knowledge, theories, and skills included in the curriculum (Standard 2.e). The standards also call for faculty with a strong and diverse knowledge base (Standard 6) and for the curriculum to provide an interdisciplinary team approach to problem solving (Standard 19.f). The core of our human services program is designed based on these interdisciplinary CSHSE standards.

Our human services program is only one example of how an interdisciplinary program can be designed. We are consistently updating our program based on current research in related fields, as well as feedback from students, faculty, site supervisors, and our advisory board. As our program evolves, we will continue to look for ways to incorporate our interdisciplinary approach into all areas of program design. We believe this is the most effective approach to best meet the needs of our students as we prepare them for careers in the human services field.

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