

A Multicultural, Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model for Therapeutic Recreation and Related Fields

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Abstract

Innovative educational models are being developed to respond to the trends affecting therapeutic recreation (TR) and related human services. These trends include an increasingly multicultural client population and, correspondingly, a need for a more diverse work force, and a call to address the needs of non-traditional college students. A collaboration between a major state agency and a public university with a large Hispanic student body was initiated to recruit bilingual students into the agency's work force. This process led to the development of the Hispanic Habilitation Specialist Internship Program (HHSIP), that consisted of an interdisciplinary minor in developmental disabilities that included a course in therapeutic recreation, and a paid internship in a community-based setting. The program was successful in educating students to meet the needs of the changing work place, in providing therapeutic recreation students with knowledge of related disciplines, in recruiting new majors into TR, and in helping students gain practical experience on which to base career decisions.

Key words: Curriculum, Developmental disabilities, Hispanic, Interdisciplinary, Multicultural, Therapeutic recreation

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Introduction

The human services fields, including therapeutic recreation (TR), are being affected by a number of societal factors. Among these factors are deinstitutionalization and a shift to community-based service settings, changing demographics of the clients served in terms of age and diverse ethnic/cultural backgrounds, and a philosophy of inclusion that relies heavily on interdisciplinary care. While human services personnel are currently facing these changes in the work place, academic curricula are just beginning to respond to the need to have students better prepared for professional practice.

One contributing factor to the calls for relevance in higher education is an increase in the numbers of non-traditional college students with a concurrent decrease in the numbers of traditional students. The non-traditional student is older, often has family and job responsibilities, and may have previous work experience in a professional or paraprofessional capacity related to his/her college major. For the non-traditional

student, pursuing higher education is often very directly linked to a desire for improved and concrete career opportunities. In response to these challenges, educators are seeking to develop innovative training programs that combine a sound education in a professional discipline with opportunities to develop and practice needed skills. Students benefit from early exposure to the real-life work situation and from education that responds quickly to the changing work place.

The purpose of this paper is to describe an interdisciplinary, experiential education program, the Hispanic Habilitation Specialist Internship Program (HHSIP), that was developed to respond to the changes in human services. This program was a collaboration between a university and a large state agency serving individuals with developmental disabilities. This program was interdisciplinary in course work, multicultural in students and clients, and experiential in the internship component in community-based settings. HHSIP addressed concerns of educators in recreation and leisure studies, as well as other academic departments, that suggested the need for curriculum designs appropriate to the changing work place, the recruitment and retention of minority students, and the provision of a practical foundation for students upon which to make career decisions.

Changes in the Work Place

The lives of individuals with developmental disabilities have been affected in recent years by a number of trends. For those individuals residing in state institutions, their place of residence has shifted to smaller group homes or community-based residences. Along with this shift, the professional staff, such as psychologists, speech therapists, physical therapists and therapeutic recreation specialists, have been re-deployed from full-time at one site to serving a number of community-based sites, such as group homes, day treatment, and day training programs. The effect of this change is that the group homes are primarily staffed by direct care workers who have little professional training. Although most community residences seek to create a home environment that provides for a full range of experiences that contribute to personal growth, rarely do staff have skills in recreation programming and leadership (Kraus and Shank, 1992). The high rate of attrition among those staff who provide direct services to individuals with developmental disabilities also affects the quality of care. The annual staff turnover rate, nationally, for direct care staff working with individuals with developmental disabilities in privately-operated facilities is 70% and in public facilities 37.3% (CUNY, 1993). Training for direct care staff not only provides the staff with the tools they require to do the job, but reinforces the perception of their work as high quality. In most fields, higher training indicates a higher quality of service (Surpin, Haslanger, & Dawson, 1994).

Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, workers have been required to help people with disabilities enter the mainstream of all aspects of community life, including recreation and leisure activities. The growing trend toward consumer advocacy and the advent of the "inclusion" philosophy necessitates that personnel acquire knowledge from multiple disciplines. With the trend toward hiring professional-level direct care workers will come the need for curriculum innovations.

The changing demographics of the developmentally disabled population to a more culturally diverse group also indicate new skills for both professional and direct care staff (City University of New York, 1993). There are twenty-three million Americans with Spanish surnames or Spanish-speaking backgrounds in the United States today with projections of over fifty million by the year 2020 (Kraus, 1994). Currently, a paucity exists of Spanish-language support services for Spanish-speaking families with developmentally disabled members. Although the Spanish-speaking population in the U.S. is characterized by diversity, the common language, participation around family life, and expectations for children offer some insight for service providers. A friendly, informal, and leisurely chatting style has been recognized as an asset for professionals working with Spanish-speaking families (Lynch & Hanson, 1992). Individuals with developmental disabilities often experience frustration in their attempts to communicate when they are not understood. Clearly Spanish-speaking personnel would ease many frustrations for these consumers and their families.

Impact on Education

The previously-mentioned changes point to a future of community-based human services for a multicultural population with an emphasis on consumer rights and choices. Direct care workers will be supervised by varied professional personnel who, due to work force cutbacks, may need to function more as generalists than specialists. It well may be that undergraduate recreation students would benefit from a diverse, varied program of study with more electives and a generalist preparation in order to face the changing work place (Butts, 1992). Aguilar and Washington (1990) encouraged multicultural education in leisure studies as a means to foster acceptance and appreciation of diversity, and to promote awareness of the need for a more harmonious society. Allison and Smith (1990) predicted a "constant and increased demand" (p.51) to meet the leisure needs of racial and ethnic minorities in the future. Through multicultural education in the classroom and recruitment of students of diverse backgrounds, TR educators may better prepare students to work with a multi-ethnic clientele.

To develop skills to work effectively in a collaborative transdisciplinary environment, students should take courses with other human services or allied health professionals (Powell, Sable & Aldrich, 1993/94). Mobily (1983) recognized that the practitioner should be knowledgeable enough about disabilities to communicate and be credible with peers in other disciplines. Interdisciplinary cooperation is seen as a sound practice, but lack of understanding of the training experiences and capabilities of another profession can be a barrier to team effectiveness (Smith, Perry, Neumayer, Potter & Smeal, 1992). Recognition of the benefit to TR students of studying other fields also comes from the National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification (NCTRC) and its requirement of supportive course work from the human services. In an interdisciplinary education model, students from other fields will be exposed to the values and practice of TR as well.

In addition to relevant academic course content, fieldwork experiences will be affected by the trends described earlier. Field experience and its role in the development of professional competence is recognized in TR preparation. NCTRC (1992) included internship as one of its three categories of course work. McGhee (1987) concluded that

internships contribute substantially to developing applied professional skills. Jewell (1989) called the field experience a pivotal aspect of the student's academic program, one that affects future academic and career choices.

Discussing recruitment and retention of students of color to recreation and leisure studies, Glover (1993) offered specific recruitment strategies: use personnel of color in recruitment and appropriate literature and/or video materials, develop unique programs for students of color, and provide financial assistance. In order to retain these students, she suggested remedial classes, tutoring and counseling, a peer network, faculty support, relevant curriculum and a positive social climate.

The Program

These needs and concerns were combined in a multicultural, interdisciplinary experiential education model to prepare students for the challenges of working in an expanding community-based service system for individuals with developmental disabilities. The HHSIP was developed through the City University of New York (CUNY) Consortium on Disability Studies and implemented at Lehman College in the Bronx in cooperation with the New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD). OMRDD was experiencing a shortage of professional staff (those with a minimum of a bachelor's degree) who could communicate with the rapidly increasing Spanish-speaking client population with developmental disabilities and their families. The Bronx was particularly well-suited for this program because of the closing of the Bronx Developmental Center in 1992 and the concomitant shift to a community-based service system of group homes and day treatment and day training programs. Lehman College, the only four-year public college in the Bronx, also has the largest percentage (32%) of Hispanic students of any senior college in the CUNY system.

To encourage the entrance of persons from diverse backgrounds into the human services requires mentoring and support for students to stay in school (Lynch & Hanson, 1992). One goal of the HHSIP was to recruit and train bilingual entry-level professionals for a variety of human service fields, including therapeutic recreation, to work with individuals with developmental disabilities. A second goal, and a particular focus of the Consortium on Disability Studies, was worker education, particularly of paraprofessionals who were either attending college, had attended in the past but were not currently in attendance, or had never attended. Lehman College also has the largest number of paraprofessionals enrolled of any of the senior CUNY colleges. The HHSIP was an initiative to provide curricula that was relevant to their jobs and to offer assistance in career development through education.

To meet the goal of the HHSIP, an interdisciplinary twelve-credit minor in developmental disabilities was developed. The minor consisted of a choice of three three-credit courses from existing college course offerings, including "Introduction to Therapeutic Recreation", and a fourth course developed as part of this initiative that was an introductory course in developmental disabilities. OMRDD provided twenty paid internships that were civil service positions at an annual salary of approximately \$19,000, prorated to twenty hours per week with full health and retirement benefits.

Student Recruitment

Two hundred students enrolled in selected human service courses, including bicultural/bilingual education, during the 1992 Spring semester, were mailed a letter describing the program. Those interested students responded by telephone to request an application. Students were asked on the application to describe their interest in and experience working with people with disabilities. The academic requirements for entry into the program were completion of sixty college credits, a minimum 2.5 grade point average on a 4.0 scale, and passing grades on the CUNY Basic Skills Assessment Tests. Students also had to have at least one full year of their education to complete prior to graduation in order to have time to complete all the course work and a minimum six months of internship. All participants were tested for oral proficiency in English and Spanish to fulfill the requirement of bilingualism. A student could be accepted on a probationary basis but could not begin the internship until all requirements were met.

Thirty students attended a preliminary informational meeting followed by an orientation to OMRDD and its facilities given by a Hispanic, bilingual representative of OMRDD. A video of existing programs was shown and the language proficiency test was administered at this time. Eventually, twenty students were accepted and enrolled in the program at which time they officially declared their minor, enrolled in the interdisciplinary course on developmental disabilities, and began the internship. Students began their course work for the minor in September, 1992. Students went on two supervised field visits to a day treatment program and to two group homes to see the types of facilities where they would be interning.

The Minor

The courses in the minor included a choice of three of six courses: (1) Introduction to Therapeutic Recreation, (2) Introduction to Special Education, (3) Psychology of Speech and Hearing, (4) Psychology of Exceptional Children, (5) Introduction to American Sign Language, and (6) Physical Education for the Developmentally Disabled. This last course was particularly valuable because academic content was combined with training of adults with developmental disabilities for Special Olympics participation. This opportunity provided some students with their first exposure to this population. The minor emphasized the importance of a multidisciplinary education in order to best meet the needs of the whole person and to facilitate understanding of the responsibilities of all the professionals in a multidisciplinary setting.

The fourth course in the minor, Introduction to Developmental Disabilities, was required for all students in the program. In this course all the disciplines were represented and their interrelationships highlighted, thus mirroring this approach in working with the clients. The course was a new course and designed as a component of this specific program. Although the principles and values of multiculturalism were a consistent theme emphasized throughout the course, one unit specifically addressed working in a multicultural service environment with people of differing ethnicity, cultures, and abilities.

The Internship

The internship was the method by which students became more knowledgeable about developmental disabilities on a practical level, gained first-hand knowledge of the OMRDD service delivery system, and developed an experiential understanding of the challenges facing the developmentally disabled population. Prior to beginning the internship in April 1993, students were given a physical examination and an orientation by OMRDD. They also received First Aid, CPR, and SCIP (Strategic Crisis Intervention Program) training. College credit was available for the internship if desired by the students.

A field coordinator was added to the program to serve as a liaison between the agency and the college, to provide clinical supervision to the students, and to address concerns of the site staff. She visited the sites on a bi-weekly basis and was in contact with students by telephone. Her responsibilities included meeting with students to monitor their learning experiences, meeting with site supervisors to clarify student roles and planning for additional educational activities such as observations of and meetings with professional staff.

Internships were available in both day treatment programs and group homes. In the day treatment program students were assigned to a habilitation specialist (a bachelor's degree level position) in a classroom setting who typically served six to eight adults with severe and profound mental retardation. Students were expected to write and implement client goals, assist in skill training and provide one-to-one leadership, and supervise the group in the habilitation specialist's absence. The day training clients were higher functioning than those clients in the day treatment program; students assisted them in learning and completing job-related tasks. In the group home students primarily worked with direct-care staff (developmental aides) by supervising free time; designing and implementing recreation activities; assisting with feeding, dressing and other self-care skills; and working with clients on their goals. The majority of the clients were Hispanic and African-American; some were non-verbal. Regarding language skills, a combination of English, Spanish, American Sign Language and finger spelling was used.

Results

Twenty students participated in HHSIP. All were female who ranged in age from twenty to fifty years. The mix of students ranged from traditional college-age students to full-time working mothers. Three of the students had a child with a disability, two had siblings with disabilities and one was hearing impaired. Eight students had a major in psychology, six in speech pathology, three became TR majors as a result of the program, and the remaining three included one each from English, Spanish, and Science. Six of the twenty worked as paraprofessionals in the public schools. This supported one of the goals of the Consortium to educate the existing work force. All declared the minor in developmental disabilities - some as a second minor.

Students' reasons for participating in the program were centered around a desire to help people, to gain experience, and to develop skills for their careers. One wrote:

I have always been an advocate for special programs for developmentally disabled children and have participated in letter writing campaigns when funds for these programs were threatened. I would like to help these individuals through counseling or other programs geared toward empowering them.

Several weeks after beginning the internship, students were asked for feedback on a questionnaire and in personal interviews. They responded that they were satisfied, were learning from the staff and the clients, and were gaining familiarity with the needs and behaviors of the population. One said, "I feel that I am contributing especially when some of the staff make a comment about how the individual has warmed up to me."

Of the twenty students, only one dropped out of the program, shortly after beginning the internship, because "it was not for me." One left due to a death in the family. One could not continue her internship after the summer due to time constraints. The remaining seventeen students fulfilled or exceeded the minimum six month internship requirement. Three completed two full years.

Students indicated that the salary and benefits were an important feature of the program and were certainly significant factors in their continuing in the internship for an extended period. For the non-traditional students, earning money was a major consideration.

Regarding the "Introduction to Developmental Disabilities" course, attendance was 100% for the entire class. Student evaluations included praise for the following features: acquiring knowledge related to MR/DD; opportunity to discuss specific issues and concerns; presentations from guest speakers representing a variety of fields, including their own majors; and interaction with fellow interns. Several students felt it would have been helpful to have taken the course prior to beginning the internship.

Evaluation

To evaluate HHSIP, an evaluation model was adapted from the Congruence between Performance and Objective Approach to evaluating higher education programs discussed by Gardner (1977). This model includes four steps: 1. Assess the worth of the goals of the program; 2. Determine if goals were met; 3. Describe the performance of the program variables; and 4. Should the program be maintained, improved, expanded or terminated? According to Gardner (1977), one of the advantages of this approach is its relevance to current societal concerns which seemed an apt consideration for HHSIP. Gardner also suggested incorporating professional judgment in evaluation of higher education programs. The HHSIP was evaluated by a team consisting of the Faculty Coordinator, the Chairperson of the college's Recreation Department, the Director of the CUNY Consortium on Disability Studies, the Chair of the Special Education Department at the college, the Field Coordinator of HHSIP, and the Director of Staff Training for the Bronx District Developmental Services Office of OMRDD. The issues of objectivity were discussed, and the team members expressed confidence that they could be objective in the evaluation process. Although everyone wanted the program to succeed, no one wanted to commit the resources of time, money and staff to a program that was not successful in accomplishing its purposes.

The four steps in the evaluation procedure are presented with the relevant findings in the following section.

1. Assess the worth of the goals of the program. The goals of the program were developed by experts from CUNY and OMRDD representing psychology, special education, therapeutic recreation, and personnel management, and were based on the latest trends in the area of developmental disabilities. Therefore, the goals were deemed worthy. Although the clients were not formally solicited for their feedback, anecdotal reports from the students and their supervisors at the sites revealed that the clients had formed positive relationships with the students. The clients responded well to the extra attention the students brought to their lives. These reports reinforced the assessment that the program was worthwhile and that the goals were worthy.

2. Determine if goals were met. The goals were (a) to recruit and train entry-level professionals for a variety of careers and (b) to re-train state workers for the changing community-based service settings of group homes and day programs. To accomplish the first goal, a program of study (the minor including the course in developmental disabilities) was developed and implemented. Seventeen students from a variety of disciplines were trained in this program. They are entering the work force in a variety of jobs serving individuals with developmental disabilities, such as special education teacher, speech teacher, or habilitation specialist at OMRDD or other agencies.

Regarding the second goal, the Introduction to Developmental Disabilities course has been offered at two sites to current workers in the field. As a result, the entire minor sequence of courses is being offered to these two groups of workers. This experience may lead some of them to choose TR as a major as a result of taking the Introduction to TR course. The intention was to use higher education to open the door to other career opportunities in the agency that would be available to these workers, thereby reducing the high turnover rate of staff.

3. Describe the performance of the program variables. The three variables were the students, OMRDD, and the college. The program was to start with five students, but due to the response it was expanded to twenty who met all the qualifications for the program. They performed their tasks and responsibilities to the satisfaction of their site supervisors and administrative personnel from OMRDD and CUNY. Seventeen (85%) continued to intern or work at OMRDD or in another agency related to MR/DD.

OMRDD provided paid internships with benefits. They did not, however, provide an agency mentor for each student from her chosen field as promised. One of the results of the move to a community-based system is that clinical staff do not work full-time at many of the sites. Therefore, there was a lack of professionals to instruct and supervise the students in the various settings. Another problem was a lack of adequate TR programming. One of the day programs and many of the group homes did not have the services of a therapeutic recreation specialist.

The college's responsibility was to provide training to both the students and the existing work force. It was successful in developing the appropriate course of study, and recruiting and enrolling the students. The courses will continue to be offered on and off-campus. The college has been able to provide education and career guidance and counseling to the students on an individual basis. Overall, the variables performed satisfactorily, although certain elements at the agency need to be addressed to improve the quality of the internships. In addition, the college will need to continue to evaluate the choices of courses in the minor for their relevance to the overall course of study.

4. Decision Making: Should the program be maintained, improved, expanded or terminated? Based on professional judgment by the field coordinator and relevant OMRDD staff and feedback from the students on questionnaires and in personal interviews, the program was deemed a success. The recruitment and training of bilingual students in the area of developmental disabilities was accomplished, and they were provided with first-hand experience in the field. Eight of the participants who have since graduated are now employed in OMRDD as habilitation specialists, or as special education or speech teachers in the public schools. Because of the program, educational opportunities were extended to workers in the field through the course work being offered at their work sites. Improvements are recommended in the actual internship experience in terms of mentorship at the site. Efforts have begun to expand the program to other state agencies and to CUNY colleges in the other boroughs of New York City.

Discussion and Recommendations

Is this program only incidentally beneficial to therapeutic recreation, or is it significant in a more profound sense? The program addresses the changing needs of the individuals receiving human services, including TR. With improvements in health and treatment approaches, clients are both living longer and functioning at a higher level. Through a program such as HHSIP, students are better prepared to meet the needs of the changing client population and the challenges of a community-based service system. The combination of the course work and the internship provides immediacy and relevance in knowledge acquisition and application of skills. In community-based settings, TRSs and other professional staff may find their roles blurred as consumers live in the normalized environment of the group home and increase their participation in community life.

The driving force to develop the program was the increase in the numbers of clients with developmental disabilities with a Hispanic background. TR has often been at the forefront of new trends and recognizing the need to be sensitive to and tolerant of all people has been a hallmark of TR service. Recruiting students who are culturally compatible with the clients is empowering for both students and clients and enriches the profession. In the case of HHSIP, all but one of the students' first language had been Spanish. This strengthens both recruitment and retention of minority students because their uniqueness is the "raison d'être" of the program.

The interdisciplinary nature of HHSIP was a significant component of the program. Traditionally, TR education has included material on other allied health professions. Here was an effort to provide a more sharply focused learning of other disciplines to be

used in practice. Not only will TR students who select this minor become more knowledgeable through taking courses in other areas and networking with students from other majors, the other students are given an opportunity to learn about TR. Hopefully, this interaction will promote more effective and efficient teamwork among professionals. Another option for TR majors is to use this type of internship to gain a broad exposure to a particular agency's service rather than as the major field experience that meets certification requirements. The program gave the students the opportunity to see if this type of work, setting, or population was right for them and to expose them to other possible career choices.

At the time of recruiting students into HHSIP, only two bilingual TR majors were eligible for this program. As a result of HHSIP, three mature highly motivated and experienced students, who were not previously aware of TR as a career, were recruited into the TR major. Housing the minor in the leisure sciences program increased the profile of the TR curriculum. Word-of-mouth was a significant contributor in student recruitment for future participation in the program.

A surprising discovery was that individuals with developmental disabilities in community-based settings run by the state agency were often lacking programming provided by therapeutic recreation specialists. This finding may suggest the need to develop a new model of TR service in this arena. HHSIP has made students aware of the potential value of TR in these settings and the nature of the opportunities that are available. HHSIP placed TR on an equal footing with the other professions and will, perhaps, result in greater respect for TR as its role in community settings becomes more recognized. Although the recreation programming the students provided was no substitute for the services of a therapeutic recreation specialist, participating with the students in recreation activities was a normalizing experience for the clients.

Some shortcomings of the program were noted. Dealing with a large agency involves many employees at various sites. With frequent staff turnover and re-assignments, it took time for communication to filter to the direct-care staff about the students' roles. Also, the difficulty in placing students with a professional mentor in their field was unanticipated as was the lack of TR staff in the agency. Students did, at times, do direct care of feeding, dressing and toileting and did not always provide "professional" services to the clients. However, they felt that this experience gave them a full picture of the lives of individuals with developmental disabilities.

Specific recommendations can be made for HHSIP as well as general implications for similar programs:

1. Hold a seminar for all relevant agency staff regarding the program, the intern's responsibilities, and the staff's responsibilities, prior to the start of the internships.
2. Continually evaluate specific course content and the relevance of selected courses in the minor.
3. Investigate the feasibility of expanding the program to other agencies and to other types of settings and populations. Work has begun in CUNY on a

similar program for the field of psychiatric rehabilitation, as has course development in the area of deaf culture. It is important to note that this program is a model that can be used with other client groups in other types of settings and from other cultural backgrounds

4. Monitor students' placement into professional entry-level positions and how long they stay at the job. Was their experience in HHSIP a factor in their hiring?

5. Articulate to agencies the benefits of paid internships. For the non-traditional student, salary and/or benefits are important incentives. Stipends, credit for internships, relationships with a mentor, and the opportunity to embark on a career path appeared to be inducements for students to participate in the program.

HHSIP illustrates the important role recreation and leisure departments can fill on campuses: to be at the forefront of addressing continuing societal concerns of educational relevance, multiculturalism, satisfying career opportunities, and the needs of non-traditional students. As the demands of the profession grow more complex, as influenced by the changes in society, the well-rounded, well-educated individual will adapt more easily and be less subject to the frustrations of the work place. The issues of inclusion, transdisciplinary approaches, diversity and multicultural understanding, recruitment and retention can be addressed in an innovative approach to education. Regardless of each individual student's eventual career choice, the benefits of increased understanding, sensitivity and awareness will remain with them for a lifetime.

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