

Title: Infusing Experiential Education throughout the Undergraduate BSW Curriculum

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Abstract: Many social work programs are designed with an internship or apprenticeship as a capstone learning experience. However, the benefit of experiential learning throughout the curriculum is often undervalued. Service learning is one such strategy that uses community engagement as a vehicle for learning social work concepts and practicing basic skills. In this interactive workshop, participants will learn the value of including service learning at the early stages of undergraduate social work education, develop strategies for overcoming barriers to implementation, and practice linking service learning with existing curricular goals.

Many social work programs are designed with an internship or apprenticeship as a capstone learning experience. However, the benefit of experiential learning throughout the curriculum is often undervalued. One example of this is service learning which has been shown to have several beneficial effects (Schelbe, Petracchi, & Weaver, 2014). Service learning is when students are engaged in the community and using their academic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs. Service learning can be tailored in a variety of ways to help achieve both the desired student learning and community needs. This method can help prioritize the needs and views of service users. Service learning has been recognized as a useful pedagogical and community building tool throughout Europe (Luna, 2012). Students and communities benefit from well-developed service learning programs. Service learning helps students develop a more nuanced understanding of society, poverty and systems of oppression (Sanders,

McFarland, & Bartoli, 2003; Wehling, 2008). Service learning can also help in improving student attitudes towards specific populations (Kanenberg, Mapp, Dudley, & McFarland, 2014). Another benefit is early socialization into the profession (Levy & Edmiston, 2015). Other benefits of early service learning include building skills that make students more qualified for internships and enhancing the educational experience of “active learners.”

In this session, participants will learn the value of including service learning at the early stages of undergraduate social work education, develop strategies for overcoming barriers to implementation, and practice linking service learning with existing curricular goals. The presenters will draw on their experience of teaching in a US undergraduate BSW program that requires students to complete at least 725 hours of diverse types of experiential learning over a four year program, including multiple service learning experiences.

In this workshop, the presenters will orient participants to key concepts of service learning and provide an overview of research related to its benefits, including that conducted at the presenters’ institution. Attendees will learn about multiple models of service learning. Attendees will then apply this knowledge through an interactive section in which, under guidance by the facilitators, groups of 3-5 participants will each select a course with associated learning objective that they would like to focus on. Each group member will then discuss available community partnerships that could be used as potential service learning placements. Finally group members will be asked to consider how they might assess the outcomes of this service learning. Throughout Part 1 of the workshop, participants will be encouraged to make a list of barriers to implementation, but to ignore them until later in the workshop.

The facilitators will then discuss potential barriers to implementation of service learning. Practical considerations (i.e. lack of agencies, transportation, etc.) as well as research that

suggests that faculty perception can be a barrier to implementation (Courtney, Madden, Davis, & Preble, 2014) will be presented. Via facilitated group work, group members will develop solutions to the potential barriers to implementation discovered in Part 1 of the workshop.

In summary, via this interactive workshop, participants will leave with an ability to articulate the value of service learning and its necessary components. They will also gain experience linking service learning to learning goals. Finally, participants will develop strategies for overcoming barriers to implementation of service learning in their communities.

References

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