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Quality Internships for Part-time Graduate Students: An Exploratory Study of a University/Agency Partnership

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The university student population is changing and more students choose to complete graduate programs while working full-time and going to school part-time. Part-time graduate students, who are working towards a professional degree in the human services domain often struggle finding quality internship placements that are available during non-regular office hours. At the same time, non-profit organizations, especially those who are small and lesser known, struggle to recruit, train, and retain high quality volunteers. This is especially problematic since the number of non-profits is increasing and the number of volunteers decreasing. To look for answers both university part-time programs and non-profits must look to innovative solutions. The literature speaks of the necessity of partnerships but there is a lack of specific examples within the literature. This exploratory study describes how a partnership between a university part-time graduate program in social work and a local non-profit grief camp program for children led to a win-win situation that fulfilled the needs of both and provided future social workers with a high quality internship opportunity.

Keywords: Quality internships, Part-time graduate students, Non-profits, University partnership

The number of human service graduate programs (Counseling, Marriage and Family Therapy, Social Work, etc.) has greatly increased over the past two decades (Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), 2014a), increasing the need for these programs to find more opportunities to fulfill their students' internship requirements. This is especially true for part-time graduate programs since the students attending these programs often choose this alternative because they have full-time job responsibilities to attend to. This fact, and decreased federal and state fiscal support, increases the challenge to find alternative placements for part-time social work graduate students (Newman, Dannenfelser, Clemmens, and Webster, 2007). The task for this cohort is to find placements that are available after hours or during weekends. At the same time, the number of non-profits is growing (Randle & Dolnicar, 2009), but the availability of volunteers is not keeping pace with the demand. This has led to a competition for volunteers and has made it increasingly difficult for non-profits to carry out their missions. Although the literature stresses the importance of university/agency partnerships, few are described in the literature. For example, partnerships are partly concerned with bringing agency staff into the arena of student learning at the university, yet examples of this happening are scarce (Gursansky & Sueur, 2012). This paper describes a creative partnership solution to assist a part-time social work academic program to place its students in a suitable learning environment off hours and to assist a non-profit organization to fill requirements for competent, motivated volunteers.

Background

University Internship Demands

During the last two decades three substantial trends have developed within human service academic programs. These programs include undergraduate and graduate professional social work, counseling, human services, marriage and family therapy, and a growing number of applied sociology programs. First, there has been a substantial growth in the number of accredited social work programs. An example of this profound growth can be seen in nationally accredited social work programs. In 1995 there were 402 accredited graduate and undergraduate social work programs (Lennon, 1995). By 2014, that number had grown to 733 with close to 30 in the candidacy process (CSWE, 2014a). With the identification of social work as a growth profession (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014) the number of programs will no doubt increase.

The second major trend is a move away from generalist or macro practice to clinical and specialty training. According to Reid and Edwards (2006) the majority of social work students want a clinical education. The increased emphasis on the value of the practice-oriented license has required schools to add courses that meet the clinical requirements of licensure. Within those programs that offer a clinical curriculum, there is a growing emphasis upon specialty training within the clinical area. It is not uncommon to see clinical specialties in substance abuse treatment, mental health, child services, or gerontology.

A final trend is the proliferation of part-time and on-line programs. In 2013 there were 6,373 baccalaureate part-time students enrolled in social work programs and 19,010 part-time graduate students (CSWE, 2014b). This development has opened human services professional education to non-traditional students who may be working full-time. These part-time programs normally involve three to four years of coursework and the required number of internship hours. Scheduling courses that are accessible by part-time students is problematic, but can be addressed with only minimal program stretch. Most human service agencies are open during normal business hours. Night and weekend staffing is minimal and agencies are often without clinical supervisors at those times. Thus, developing a quality internship experience on nights and weekends has been extremely difficult. To add to the difficulties, within graduate programs, there are normally two internships. The foundation year internship is a more generalist setting that incorporates shadowing of professionals, observation, and performance of basic interventive skills. The concentration year internship requires immersion into the clinical specialty and advanced training to prepare the student for entry-level professional work.

The internship experience is a major element of all applied clinic human service academic programs. The internship placement is where theory learned in the classroom needs to be integrated into practice and applied to real life situations (Cleak and Smith, 2012). Unfortunately, social work schools are dependent on agencies for placement of their students, but the agencies may not be committed to the "learning organization," i.e. the integration of theory and practice (Clapton, et al., 2006). However, this integration is vital (Hopkins, Deal, & Bloom, 2005; Ryan, McCormack, & Cleak, 2006) and models for this merging of theory and practice are available (Clapton, et al., 2006; Berg-Weger, Rochman, Rosenthal, Sporleder, & Birkenmaier, 2007). Unfortunately, evidence showing that use of the models occurs or is effective is scarce (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012).

Thus, these placements require good clinical supervision. However, agencies are

unwilling to assume the extra responsibility of educating students due to demands in the workplace (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Finding good supervisors at good agencies has become a common obstacle for part-time academic programs. The biggest source of discontent of social workers in placement is the supervision and support they obtained (Cleak & Smith, 2012).

Some part-time programs solve the dilemma of finding quality internships for part-time students by using employment-based field placements (Newman et al., 2007), others by depending on staff that is less experienced (Bocage, Homonoff, & Riley, 1995). Other ways universities have dealt with the increased demand for supervision is overseas placements (Australian Institute of Primary Care, 2004; Bocage et al., 1995) as well as external supervision (Cleak, Hawkins, & Hess, 2000). However, although this type of supervision may be increasing, there are concerns about the quality of such a supervisory model (Cleak & Smith, 2012).

The proliferation of academic programs has given rise to competition among schools for advanced internship placements. The competition for strong placements that can accommodate part-time students is especially difficult. Agencies with flexible hours and good supervision will be essential elements of growing part-time professional training programs. One way to deal with the issue of good clinical supervision in part-time social work programs is to forge academic-agency partnerships (Cleak et al., 2000; Gursansky & Sueur, 2012). Agencies with “surge” programs such as camps, temporary training programs, or programs of time-limited intensive treatment will offer excellent internship training experiences at times that work for a part-time, working cohort.

Non-Profit Volunteer Perspectives

Non-profit agencies spend a lot of time and money recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers. Many non-profits experience difficulties in all three of these areas, making it difficult to maintain the tasks of the organizations.

In the area of recruitment, competition with other non-profits enlisting people willing to volunteer (Allen & Mueller, 2013), and knowing who and how to recruit, makes the task of procuring volunteers overwhelming for volunteer coordinators of non-profit organizations. There are currently one and a half million non-profit organizations in the United States (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2012/2013). Approximately 25% of the U.S. population volunteered in these organizations between 2009 and 2013 (Giving USA, 2013). This is a slight decrease since 2003 further accenting the toughening competition and the imbalance in supply and demand that allows volunteers to be more selective (Hartenian, 2008).

Researchers have suggested that organizations “segment the market” (Randle & Dolnicar, 2009) to save money and time when recruiting volunteers. Segmenting involves going after the right type of volunteer for your agency to save time and money. To target the right volunteer, organizations need to know who is most likely to contribute a substantial number of hours. Randle and Dolnicar (2009) suggest that these high contributing volunteers are people who do not work or who work part-time versus fulltime, are older (over 36 years of age), and have children. They are also motivated by more factors than those who are less likely to volunteer. Factors include not only altruistic motives such as helping others, but also more self-centered reasons such as meeting different kinds of people, setting a good example for others, socialization with others like themselves, keeping themselves active, and feelings of doing a good job (Randle & Dolnicar, 2009). Other motives include to use

skills and talents, increase self-esteem, and to open up employment possibilities (Clary et al. 1998). The implications from these findings then are that non-profits need to look for and concentrate marketing strategies on those who fit the above listed demographics and who are looking to fulfill the identified needs. No suggestions are provided as to how this is done, leading non-profits knowing what to reach for but without instructions on how to get there.

In addition, smaller sized organizations generally have more difficulty enlisting volunteers than larger, better known organizations (Marx, 1999). The larger organizations have more resources available to recruit volunteers, and have the advantage of their “brand.” Also, organizations that have a higher variety of volunteer positions will have an easier time recruiting volunteers (Heidrich, 1990). Furthermore, it is also important for non-profit organizations to show volunteers that they matter (Black & DiNitto, 1994). Deducing from the above, smaller non-profits will have difficulties recruiting volunteers because they oftentimes are lesser known, have fewer roles for volunteers to choose from, and have limited financial resources to allocate to volunteer appreciation and marketing strategies.

In addition to recruiting the “right” volunteers, non-profits must manage the time consuming and costly task of training volunteers. Volunteer turnover is high (Allen & Mueller, 2013) and many volunteer coordinators from non-profits will spend inordinate time training new volunteers just to replace volunteers who leave empty spaces behind. Smaller agencies may not have the staff available to train prospective volunteers adequately. In addition, most non-profits are run by people in the helping professions who often do not know how to train and manage volunteers (Wilson, 1984). To hire consultants to help with the task of training would be too costly for agencies with small budgets.

Retention of volunteers is crucial for non-profit organizations as recruitment and training of competent volunteers is both costly and time consuming and it is imperative that agencies do what they can to retain them. Too often volunteers quit, and the reasons may be complex and multi-dimensional. One may be burnout, which may be created by role ambiguity (Allen & Mueller, 2013). Another reason volunteers quit is poor matching to skills (Heidrich, 1990). Thus it is vital to give volunteers a clear job description, assess and know the prospective volunteer’s skills, and allow the volunteer to apply these skills to prevent loss of volunteers.

The Programs

The University

The university is one of the largest universities in the southeast with a mid-sized Master of Social Work (MSW) program. The program started in 2006 with a student cohort of 35. The fulltime student cohort has gradually increased to an average of 100 full-time students and 20 part-time students. Since its inception, the program has received Title IV-E Child Welfare education funding. This grant funds education of social work students with a one to one commitment to work in the Department of Family and Children Services. It is assumed that those students who receive Title IV-E grant funding are oriented and committed to a career in the child welfare service arena. This funding emphasizes the provision of MSW graduate training as a part of the employee’s full time job responsibilities. This led to the establishment of the University part-time MSW program in 2010. The part-time cohort typically consists of 15 to 20 students. Approximately half (50%) of these part-

time students hold full-time employment with traditional work hours in non-child welfare agencies. These students are confronted with the difficulty of finding internship placements that work with their busy schedules. This difficulty is complicated by the school's demand that a placement be of sufficient quality and rigor to meet accreditation standards. By default, many will have to stop working, creating a substantial financial burden. Others take internships at agencies that are open during weekends, but unfortunately, a lot of the services these agencies provide during weekends are run with minimal staffing and minimal services, leaving the students with a less than ideal internship site. Assuming the MSW program approves these weaker placements, the student receives clinical training that is inferior to the full-time cohort. This will have implications during the job search process following graduation.

A key metric of the quality of a social work graduate program is the percentage of its graduates that secure a professional position in a timely manner. Thus it is a constant concern of program managers to provide excellent clinical training in an internship setting in order to make its graduates competitive in the job market.

The Non-Profit Organization

The non-profit agency is a children's bereavement program that provides therapeutic weekend healing camps for youth who have lost a parent or a sibling to death. The organization relies heavily on volunteers. Four camp sessions are held each year, inviting 60-70 children and adolescents ages seven through 18 to participate in regular camp activities but also in six intensive counseling sessions over a weekend. The campers are divided into groups of six to eight campers according to age. A staff member, who is a trained, licensed grief counselor, supervises each group of campers and serves as the lead counselor. Each lead counselor supervises his or her group together with two co-counselors, both volunteers. The agency is a small non-profit, with one director and 10-12 staff members who work under contract during the camp sessions. For each weekend camp session, then, the agency needs 20-24 co-counselors.

The work the volunteers are asked to do is physically and emotionally challenging. It also requires the volunteers to have some very specific skills, such as empathy, genuineness, and good active listening skills since they are working with a vulnerable population. Camp requires the volunteers to stay with their assigned group of campers throughout the weekend, 24/7. This involves not only being present for the counseling sessions and other grief activities, but also participating in the various typical camp events, such as the ropes course, canoeing, hiking, and archery. The agency has had difficulties recruiting volunteers with the right skills and who could meet the physical requirements.

The organization is small with a limited budget, which makes it financially difficult to recruit volunteers. In addition, the lack of a well-known "branding" make the volunteer recruitment efforts more difficult (Marx, 1999). One additional struggle for this particular agency in regards to recruiting lies in the agency's lack of a selection of volunteer roles to offer prospective volunteers. The agency needs the volunteers for two specific tasks, that of co-leading and supervising a group of campers throughout each weekend.

Training of volunteers is also problematic for this agency. The agency is run by social workers that have little experience or skills in volunteer training and volunteer management. Due to its limited resources, the agency is not able to hire consultants to assist with this undertaking. Training is also time consuming, since the volunteer position of co-leader of the agency's vulnerable client population requires the volunteer to have

specific skills, such as good active listening skills, including empathic listening, and use of open ended questions. In addition, the volunteers would have to know how to respond to the children's statements and questions in regards to grief and the grieving process. The agency, to complicate matters further, does not have an assigned volunteer coordinator. The job of recruiting and training falls on the program director, who has limited time to work with the volunteers beyond recruiting and providing minimal training.

The Partnership

The Director of the MSW program heard about the non-profit program from a faculty member who has volunteered at camp. The MSW Director approached the director of the agency about the possibility of partnering with the non-profit agency as a possible internship site for its first part-time cohort of MSW students. After discussions between the MSW Director and the agency regarding pros and cons for both programs, a Memorandum of Understanding was completed and an academic/agency partnership established (Cleak & Smith, 2012).

This partnership has several components. First, the students use the agency as their placement. At the camp sessions the students are set up to serve as co-counselors. They stay with a group of campers for the full 50 hours of each camp session, providing supervision of the campers 24/7 and delivering clinical treatment, such as trauma interventions and grief counseling, during the six official counseling sessions. During the foundation internship, i.e. the first two years, the students serve as co-counselors during the counseling sessions, during the advanced internship, the third and fourth years, the students lead the counseling sessions. During both internships each student is under the supervision of one licensed social worker, who is the lead counselor for each student's group of campers. Due to the camp setting, counseling opportunities occur throughout the weekend not just during the assigned group counseling times and all interactions between the students and campers are supervised by each respective lead counselor/social worker.

Secondly, the two entities teach each other. Faculty from the university helps in-service and educate staff at the agency. A staff member of the non-profit teaches classes at the university in her specialty area – death, dying, and bereavement. Staff from the agency is invited to participate in continuing education programs at the university for free and provide in-put into the field-education program. Staff is also often invited to guest lecture in various classes.

Thirdly, the part-time students in the program are encouraged to participate in evaluation of the program and various research projects the agency is conducting and involved with. The students help with pre- and post-testing, literature review, collating and analysis of data, etc. In addition, university faculty is invited to participate in some of these research projects.

Measures and Outcomes

The outcome of the students' acquisition of the CSWE core competencies, i.e. practice behaviors required by CSWE for graduation (CSWE, 2010), is measured by the University program's several outcome measures. At the orientation session for the incoming MSW students, the students are given a pre-test which is a multiple choice test measuring the application of CSWE practice behaviors. This test is then given again at the end of completion of foundation courses and again at the end of the program before the student graduates. Other outcome measures include class papers, quizzes, exams, and other assignments

attached to various course work, and a final exam project, the Bio-psychosocial Spiritual Assessment and Outcome. In this task the students complete a thorough assessment of a client, set goals and objectives together with the client, and measure the outcome of their interventions with the client. The students are also rated on their application of practice behaviors in the internship by their internship supervisor at the end of the foundation internship and again at the end of the advanced internship. As the first part-time cohort graduated in the spring of 2014, data from this group were collated. The results of the part-time students' learning and acquisition of practice behaviors have been very positive and show that the part-time students are acquiring practice behaviors and skills equal to the full-time students (see Table 1 for outcomes on the two major outcome measures – the pre/post-test and ratings by internship supervisors).

Table 1
Outcome Measures for Pre/post Test and Evaluations by Field Instructions on Practice Behaviors – 2014 Graduating Class

Outcome Measure	Fulltime Students N=42	Mean	Part-time Students at Camp (First Graduating Part-time Cohort) N=13	Mean
Pre-test	2% at or above pass rate		5% at or above pass rate	
Post-test	81% at or above pass rate		87% at or above pass rate	
Field instructor 1st year Evaluations (44-220)		168.3		156.3
Field Instructor Final Evaluations (44-220)		199.83		199.33
Post Graduation Employment	80%*		92%**	

*Six months post graduation, 2013 cohort

**Two months post graduation, 2014 cohort

Benefits

For the university, the advantages of the arrangement of partnering with a non-profit that conducts its mission during weekends, is obvious. The university is able to offer its part-time students a placement that is convenient to them – off hours. The students are able to continue their fulltime job responsibilities and take evening classes. The students are able to fulfill the requirements of the school program, and have the opportunity to acquire the core competencies for both foundation and advanced years (CSWE, 2010). In addition, this partnership provides the university with guest lecturers from the agency, who can provide all students with valuable information from the field. The partnership allows the university to provide their graduate students with research opportunities that would otherwise not exist.

In addition to fulfilling school program requirements, the students may fulfill several other motives that research has identified among volunteers (Randle & Dolnicar, 2009; Clary et al., 1998). To measure the fulfillment of such motives, the agency uses a survey

that is given to students before graduation after fulfilling their mandated internship hours. These results are shown in Table 2. As hoped, some of the students have chosen to stay with the non-profit after graduation as contract staff members.

Table 2
Outcome of Student Survey of Camp Experience

Variable	N	Mean	Range*	
			Min	Max
At this internship, I feel I had the opportunity to socialize with others like myself	8	4.86	4	5
I feel I was able to help others	8	4.71	4	5
I feel that I did a good job	8	4.43	4	5
I feel I served as a good role model to the campers	8	4.86	4	5
I feel I served as a good role model to new volunteers	8	4.57	4	5
I feel my time at camp increased my confidence as a future counselor	8	4.86	4	5
I plan to work at camp after graduation	7	4.57	3	5

*Likert scale 1=totally disagree 2=disagree 3=neutral 4=agree 5=totally agree

The benefits to the non-profit are manifold. Recruitment of the difficult to find younger group of volunteers (Randle & Dolnicar, 2009) is made easy since the pool of students available to choose their internship at the camp sessions consists mostly of young prospective volunteers. The school program offers on the average ten to 12 volunteers, and it is helpful that this volunteer pool, for the most part, fit the requirements of being able to be physically active during the weekend. Segmenting, as suggested by researchers (Randle & Dolnicar, 2009), thus follows naturally and without the non-profit organization having to spend marketing money to find the “right” volunteers and also eliminates some competition with other non-profits. Research concerns of not being able to offer the volunteer multiple role choices (Heidrich, 1990), is not of concern with this set-up since the students want a specific experience, and this experience is what the non-profit offers.

Field supervisors have stated that it is difficult for them to keep up with theory and research (Clapton et al., 2006). These are things that the university faculty can provide help with. University faculty is willing and able to provide in-services to the agency staff. In addition, staff is provided with guidance in evaluations of the program and technical assistance of data analysis. Furthermore, the students come to the agency trained in basic clinical skills, as well as in advanced clinical skills as the school program progresses. The non-profit is able to concentrate on training the students on policies, procedures, camp program set-up, and children and grief. Management of the volunteers is minimized as the school program handles much of the management.

Retention problems are minimized since the students are embarking upon a program that will last for four years. After one training program, the non-profit will have, with minimal dropout, several well-equipped volunteers to assist with its camp sessions for several years.

Discussion

In this article the authors have discussed how one university and one non-profit have

created a partnership to assist the university program find a quality internship site for its part-time students and help the non-profit find quality volunteers to fulfill its mission. The authors want to stress three main points that are crucial to this partnership.

First, for non-profits the difficulty in finding volunteers creates a stressful situation as they try to fulfill their mission and care for their clients. They need to move away from a continuous search for qualified volunteers that enter and exit the organization and leaves the program and its clients without stability. The partnership between the non-profit agency and the university creates a team of volunteers that helps the organization provide its clients with continuity of care. This team of volunteers is well trained and provides the organization with a pool of volunteers who are ready to assume leadership roles at the agency. One of the most important factors for the agency, using this system of a team of volunteers who stay with the agency for four plus years, is that an identity of the organization is created. The non-profit organization described in this article is now identified in the community as having a positive working relationship with the university, and as having stable, high quality volunteers. Program evaluations of camp using data collected by students support the quality of work provided at camp (McClatchey & Peters, in press; McClatchey, 2014).

Second, there is a need for academic programs to move away from being resources for non-profits to becoming partners, thus creating a team of academic and non-profit partners. In today's service delivery arena, the practicum is often the sole interface between non-profit agencies and academic programs. This lack of interface is due to both separate focus and dis-alignment of missions. Academic programs are most concerned with accreditation standards, scholarship, and student success. Agencies on the other hand are most concerned with resources, client management, and matching the consumer to available resources. Even the most casual observation will reveal that the overlap of these mission essential principles is not clear or direct. The two domains often view each other as resources rather than co-laborers. Building teams and partnerships take time, repetition, good interpersonal relationships, and communication (Bogo & Globerman, 1995; Bogo & Globerman, 1999). Normally the institution/agency structure allows little time for such activity. The number of students and agency consumers continues to rise while funding decreases. True partners help each other, compliment each other, and demonstrate a consistent alignment of purpose and mission.

Finally, development of a clinical training program for non-traditional graduate students that equips them for entry-level professional practice moves them from hours of training to substance. Most academic programs conceptualize internship requirements in terms of learning objectives and hours in the field. With a part-time cohort it is quite easy to be seduced into focusing only on hours rather than quality of training. Internship training hours during off business hours are hard to find. Thus, many programs default into counting hours as a way to assure minimum standards for accreditation.

As leaders of academic clinical programs we need to do better. Students who graduate within a part-time cohort will receive the same degree and certification as those who are products of a more traditional setting. Academic programs must insure that all internship training opportunities offer superior clinical training. As described here, this may happen with perhaps a different model of operations but will still guarantee the same high quality outcome.

Teaching centers are more likely to have partnerships with universities (Bogo & Globerman, 1999). However, there are no reasons why other types of agencies cannot

join in partnerships with universities to provide high quality internship experiences. Such partnerships are “fundamental to the greater integration of theory and practice” (Gursansky & Lueur, 2012, p. 922) and would include planning for combined teaching and research. For part-time students internships need to be available off hours. With a multitude of therapeutic weekend and week long camps springing up around the country for various populations, such as e.g. ADHD (Hantson, Wang, & Grizenko-Vida, 2012), obesity (Pratt, et al., 2009), and chronic illness (Alison, Negley, & Sibthorp, 2013), such agency/university partnerships would not be a far stretch.

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