SHOW ME: Effectively Collaborating with Community Partners to Develop Students' Macro-practice Skills

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SHOW ME
Effectively collaborating with community partners to develop students’ macro-practice skills
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- We will compare and contrast mezzo-/macro-social work class projects designed as collaborative efforts with community groups.
- We will explain our process of developing an effective, collaborative partnership with a community group to ensure meaningful outcomes for both the community partner and student learning.
- We will examine and appraise a collaborative agreement tool used to support effective partnerships between students and community groups.
OUR BACKGROUND

- We have taught BSW and co-taught MSW social work macro-practice (i.e., community practice) courses that involve students working in groups to develop, implement, and evaluate community-based projects.
- We have both worked in community practice with a number of different agencies who have hosted students as participants and volunteers.
Social workers must possess the ability to bring about planned change in organizations, communities, and policy (CSWE, 2008; Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry, 2004; Netting, 2008).

Social work education must nurture students’ interest in macro-practice by providing them with opportunities to successfully implement macro-level planned change (CSWE, 2008; Deal, Hopkins, Fisher, & Hartin, 2007).

Students may be intimidated by macro practice and/or do not perceive it to be within the scope of their practice (Anderson, 2006; Flynn, 1997; Hoefer, 1999; Manalo, 2004).
In the process of nurturing students’ interest in macro-practice, what other challenges might faculty encounter from students? From colleagues? From their institutions? From the community?

What opportunities are afforded for students, faculty, and community when developing students’ macro-practice skills?
Collaborative partnerships with community groups should attend to these obstacles as well as present opportunities for learning.

Community engagement as an educational opportunity must be both deliberate and constructive so as to enhance community benefits while simultaneously promoting student learning and fostering their macro-practice skills.

Community engagement must include a participatory practice that includes roles for the populations impacted at all levels (Staples, 2009), and highlights how community engagement can achieve social change.
• Relationships must be nurtured prior to and during the collaborative process.

• Being deliberate in relationship building with community partners on the front-end – including a critical assessment of the project’s feasibility – is paramount.

• A strategic engagement of student group dynamics during the collaborative process – including activities that promote group cohesion and enhance conflict resolution – is similarly vital

• Together these strategies have been found to enhance outcomes for both the community partner and the development of students’ macro-practice skills.
Partnerships with community-based agencies can be established via:
- Students’ current or former workplaces, field agencies, or an agency identified based upon their group’s focus
- Instructors’ prior relationships with interested organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working with workplace or field agencies</th>
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<td><strong>Upside</strong></td>
<td><strong>Downside</strong></td>
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<td>Reduced time in relationship development</td>
<td>Repercussions of student mistakes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhancing the relationship with the agency</td>
<td>Attempts to accommodate the students can run counter to the needs of clients</td>
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In any case, nurturing the relationship is key.
COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

- We have pre-selected and vetted a single or multiple community-based agencies that have then presented their project idea(s) to students
  - e.g., a needs assessment, outreach, a training, fundraising, program evaluation
- Experience has led us to seek community-based agencies that propose prescribed projects with clear boundaries and expectations
  - It’s important that agencies are clear about what they need and how they can support students’ learning
- **Tool for Working with a Community-Based Agency**
  - What would you add, expand upon, or change as it applies to your context?
An existing relationship with an agency was utilized to develop a cohort-wide community engagement opportunity.

Housing Long Beach (HLB) had a large scale campaign that could sustain the work of a large group.

Two sections of a macro practice class (~50 students) took part in a large voter education campaign in a low income neighborhood to raise awareness of voting rights prior to a local city council election.

**KEY:** HLB was willing and able to attend the class to introduce themselves, train the students during one class session and prior to the event, and support the link between course content and community practice.
At the start of the semester, students were asked to reflect on their “stance as a macro practitioner” (from Brueggemann, 2013) and asked to discuss their hopes and fears related to the course and the project with HLB.

During the semester, students received course content related to group and community social work, received organizing and canvassing training, and learned about issues of safe, adequate, and affordable housing in Long Beach, CA.

At the end of the course, students were asked to reflect on their personal and professional growth.

CASE STUDY: 

HOUSING
LONG BEACH

BPD 2015
CASE STUDY:

- Consistent with the literature, students at the start of the semester expressed hesitance and skepticism regarding macro practice.

“For me, something that seems daunting in macro social work practice is trying to change old, complicated, government and social institutional structures that are causing injustices in communities. Not only are these long-standing systems in practical use, they are sometimes ideological in nature and it can sometimes be hard to sway public opinion, especially of the older generation who may feel less affected or who are unwelcoming to change. It’s too long.”

“I guess the reason why my interest in macro social work is not higher is because I was introduced to the micro level first; essentially, helping me decide what to dedicate my life to.”
Students received training on housing issues in Long Beach, CA, organizing strategies, and canvassing training.

While students were excited to participate, they expressed some fears:

- I fear that I may be too shy for the voter outreach. I fear rejection and outburst of people and not having the right words to say.
- I fear I lack the knowledge to effectively engage with the community through the collaboration with Housing Long Beach.

[I have a] fear of going out and speaking. Being vulnerable to people’s views.
CASE STUDY:

- Students learned about their city and built skills
  - There is a large wealth disparity in Long Beach. There is a great amount of need for advocacy for those who are disadvantaged.
- HLB gained the staff power of 50 students toward their campaign which allowed for greater outreach.
- Several students maintained their relationship with the organization
- A mutually beneficial relationship was solidified with the Social Work program

[I learned] that I can become an even better advocate for myself

[I learned that] in Macro practice you still need to have micro skills
We have also pre-selected 4-5 community-based agencies that are willing to work with students. Generally, we know these agencies because we’ve worked with them as professionals or because they’ve worked with us before on student projects or via Field placements.

Regardless of working with a single or multiple agencies, when students are actively engaged in their group process – not just their tasks – their work with their partner agency is less prone to conflict – even if the project does not unfold as expected.
GROUP PROCESS

• Regardless of whether a class is working as a single group or in multiple groups, we actively engage group processes that includes presenting content on task group processes and leadership styles
  • In addition, project groups typically meet for 30-60 minutes at the beginning of class each week. In these meetings, we ask students to reflect on their group process over the prior week (i.e., communication, decision-making, task accomplishment), and we meet with each group to evaluate their process and progress and troubleshoot as needed
    • *Project Group Agreement form*
  • As well, we engage project groups in team building activities
In your project groups:

- On one side of a piece of paper, identify your **Commonalities**
  - Compile a list of the things you have in common
  - Each thing on the list must apply to everyone in the group
- On the second side of the paper, list your **Uniquities**
  - Each item must apply to only one person in the group
  - Find at least 2 Uniquities for each person

- Avoid things that people can see (e.g. “everyone has hair,” or “we are all wearing clothes”)
- Select a spokesperson for the group to read your list

TEAM BUILDING ACTIVITIES

BPD 2015
• What did you notice about the *Commonalities* your group selected?
  • What common themes emerged?
• What did you notice about the *Uniquities*? How might the *Uniquities* contribute to your group’s work together?
• How did your group communicate in the exercise? (i.e., taking turns, structured, informal, etc.)
• Did you notice any patterns of leadership or strengths emerging in the group? How can you leverage these?
DISCUSSION

- How might you utilize the *Tool for Working with a Community-Based Agency* and *Project Group Agreement form* in your work with students and agencies?
- Based upon your own experiences and lessons learned, what are additional considerations?
  - What other tools have you used to facilitate productive partnerships with community-based agencies?
REFERENCES


THANK YOU!

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