

Chapter 18

Collaborative Partnerships Between a Human Services Agency and Local Community Colleges

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The events that led to the collaboration between the human services agency and the community colleges in San Mateo County are a mixture of legislative and agency-based circumstances. In the 1980s, the initiation of community-based care led the California State Department of Mental Health (DMH) and Department of Rehabilitation (DR) to develop partnerships to ensure that individuals with psychiatric illnesses were given appropriate supports to gain employment and rehabilitation. However, a study conducted by the DMH/DR's Cooperative Programs and BEST (Building Employment Service Team) networks revealed a lack of trained staff to aid in such job placement and retention efforts.

Around the same time, Tim Stringari, at the College of San Mateo Psychological Services, developed a "supported education program" designed to increase the retention of and services for college students with psychiatric illnesses by providing them extra support and guidance. Mental health managers and consumer groups in San Mateo County began collaborating with Stringari, hoping they could convince local community colleges to develop a vocational program that would give mental health providers the training they needed in rehabilitation and employment support strategies. Unfortunately, the projected number of student enrollments was insufficient to convince the colleges of the merits of developing such a program.

By the mid-1990s, the passage of welfare reform legislation and the Workforce Investment Act made job development and employment outcomes the common objective of all human services providers. The Workforce Investment Act reformed the nation's job training system and established local one-stop centers to provide job seekers with convenient access

to employment services and direct referrals to job training and education. In addition, the one-stop centers established partnerships with programs authorized under welfare-to-work and vocational rehabilitation. One-stop centers mandated that diverse human service providers begin working together in one location to help clients attain the common goal of employment success.

At this time, Edie Covent (employment systems specialist with the state Department of Mental Health) and Tim Stringari concluded that a community college curriculum which responded to the system changes and training needs of mental health services, in addition to the needs of all human service providers, might gain sufficient support of community college faculty and administration. Not only would mental health and vocational rehabilitation providers have a community college training program to prepare them for providing rehabilitation and employment support, but any human services provider could use the program to train staff in developing the employment and self-sufficiency of clients. In addition, human service clients and others interested in a career in human services would have an inexpensive, accessible program in which to participate.

With these new prospects, Edie Covent formed the Human Services Educational Collaboration (HSEC) and invited the participation of major stakeholders. They included the state Department of Mental Health, county Department of Rehabilitation, Poplar ReCare, and local community colleges (College of San Mateo, Cañada College, Skyline College, Solano Community College, and Riverside Community College). In the spring of 1997, Madelyn Martin, director of planning and development of the San Mateo County Human Services Agency, met with the Human Services Educational Collaboration to discuss the possibility of including her agency in the collaboration. At this point, the human services agency had just begun implementing a new model of service delivery (i.e., SUCCESS) that created new staff roles and responsibilities and necessitated the training of almost 200 staff members in case management and employment outcomes. The agency immediately recognized the potential benefits of participating in the collaboration and helping design a human service curriculum that would meet their training needs. All stakeholders in the collaboration were able to recognize the limitations of their own agencies and that partnering would help each of them serve clients more effectively.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMAN SERVICES CERTIFICATE CURRICULUM

Utilizing the human services agency's training funds and responding to its immediate training needs, the Human Services Education Collaboration

began developing the vocational curriculum at once. Through an evolving partnership between the human services agency of San Mateo County and the College of San Mateo, a survey was administered, a community forum with human services providers was held, and interviews with employers were completed. Essentially, employers wanted a curriculum that was very practical and differed from other programs which had been previously tried in the community. The programs at the College of San Mateo and Cañada College were also reviewed to be sure that a new program would not duplicate curricula already offered. Other counties in California were also consulted to learn about similar certificate programs. The final steps in establishing the certificate's curriculum at the College of San Mateo and Cañada College included approval by the college's chancellors, the Bay Area deans of community colleges, and the state of California.

By spending a great deal of time collecting information, the planners were able to translate the training needs of the agency into practical and realistic courses. The goal of the curriculum development process was to design learning opportunities that could be translated immediately into new approaches to delivering services and improving on-the-job work performance. One student reported that the content learned in the classes "goes hand in hand" with the work she performs at the human services agency. She reports that the classroom learning has "sharpened the tools" she has gained through work experience. It was agreed early on to closely monitor the classes so that the curriculum would always stay current and relevant to employers.

This process was facilitated by the establishment of a human services curriculum advisory board comprised of representatives of local human services providers who meet quarterly with program directors and curricula coordinators of the colleges to provide suggestions for improving the program and reviewing student performance. The advisory board oversees the human services certificate program curricula for both the College of San Mateo and Cañada College.

In addition to the input from local providers, the program also benefited from the Human Services Educational Collaboration work group that included administrators from the human services certificate programs in San Mateo, Solano, and Riverside counties, and its facilitator, Edie Covent of the state Department of Mental Health. In addition to assisting with the development of the certificate programs, its functions include monitoring, refining, and disseminating program innovations through bimonthly meetings.

The successful launching of the human services certificate program can be attributed to the shared benefits of increased community college enrollment and increased low-cost and convenient staff training for agency per-

sonnel. Community colleges can provide more cost-effective training than many other institutions or agencies based on their experience in providing technical training related to employee needs (Hirshberg, 1995).

Holub (1996) notes that successful community college programs use community-based programming to become familiar with and respond to the needs and problems of their constituents, including community leaders and community-based organizations. Community-based programming includes "environmental scanning," which involves identifying the training needs of local businesses (Morrison and Held, 1988).

An example of business-community college collaboration can be seen in the partnership between Hyundai, the automotive corporation, and Los Angeles Harbor College (Evaluation and Training Institute, 1993). Interested in developing a training program for technicians, Hyundai saw Los Angeles Harbor College as a resource for the training. Together, the business and the college developed the training materials and modules. Hyundai performed the training and certification of the Los Angeles Harbor College instructors and supplied the equipment, while the college sought additional grant funding. Similar to the Hyundai example, the human services certificate program was very much employer initiated and supported.

DESCRIPTION OF THE HUMAN SERVICES CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

The Curriculum

The human services certificate program is designed to train human services personnel to provide services for individuals and families in need of temporary social, health, and economic assistance. It prepares students for various occupations, such as mental health case manager, job coach/employment specialist, social service intake specialist, community health worker, and other entry-level human services agency positions. The target populations for the certificate program include potential human services employees, the employees of mental health and human services agencies, and human services customers who are interested in entering human services occupations.

In addition, the program is customer friendly because it not only responds to customers' needs, but also makes itself accessible to customers who want to pursue human service careers. Persons with disabilities, as well as former welfare recipients, are encouraged to participate, and, wherever possible, the program is linked to existing supported education programs at the colleges.

The four primary goals of the curriculum are as follows:

1. To respond to the training and staffing needs of the Bay area health and human services community by developing a community-sponsored, value-based human services certificate and degree program with specialties in mental health case management, job coaching, job development, and other areas.
2. To provide human services career opportunities for citizens leaving the welfare rolls and for persons with disabilities seeking self-sufficiency.
3. To further develop the community referral base and partnerships with state and local community agencies that will enhance the ability to serve and support at-risk and special populations by creating a coordinated system of supports with those agencies.
4. To develop a human services curriculum model that includes a community needs assessment and implementation plan that can be disseminated statewide and will respond to system changes in health and human services which result from welfare reform, managed care, and one-stop models.

In addition, all courses included in the curriculum are based upon the following six fundamental values of human service delivery:

1. Belief in the employment and educational potential of all persons, when provided the appropriate supports, accommodations, and skills.
2. Commitment to a client-directed approach to service, partnering with customers to attain their chosen goals.
3. Focus on the strengths of clients as opposed to deficits and functional limitations.
4. Coordinated services that smooth and accelerate client success.
5. Appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity in identity, customs, and worldviews.
6. Assisting individuals and families to achieve self-sufficiency, requiring community-wide support and commitment.

As noted in Table 18.1, the curriculum is comprised of five core courses, an internship, and four electives, with the issues of case management and employment assistance reflected in all the courses. At the colleges, each course includes forty-eight to fifty-four hours of instruction completed in sixteen to eighteen weeks, meeting once a week for three hours. Specially developed agency-based training sessions for approximately 150 staff were used in August 1997 to pilot the first two courses of the certificate program, "counseling and interviewing" and "employment support strategies."

TABLE 18.1. Program Curriculum for Human Services Certificate

Core Requirements		Electives (4)	
Course Title	Units	Course Title	Units
Introduction to human services	3	Employment support strategies*	3
Introduction to counseling and interviewing	3	Job development*	3
Introduction to case management	3	Business writing and presentation methods	3
Public assistance and benefits programs	1	Rehabilitation and recovery**	1
Computer applications	1.5	Child development	3
Human services internship	3	Child, family and community	3
Total units	14.5	Psychosocial rehabilitation**	3
		Infant development	3
		Psychology of ethnic minorities	3
		Mexican-American culture	3
		Social problems	3
		Diverse racial/ethnic cultures	3
		Interpersonal communication	3
		Total units	12

* Required for employment specialization

** Required for mental health specialization

The Instruction

A distinguishing feature of the human services certificate program is the use of instructors who are practicing professionals in the human service field. This increases the credibility of the program not only in the eyes of employee participants, but also from the perspective of employers who want to ensure that employees participating in the courses are learning pragmatic skills. In addition, staff trainers from the human services agency have been given the opportunity not only to teach the agency's on-site classes, but also to instruct the certificate courses held at the community colleges.

The Students

A majority of students attending the courses are employed full- or part-time in the human service field. Only a few students in each class are not employed or are employed in other fields. The following classifications of San Mateo County Human Service Agency staff have attended classes as

part of their job training: (1) screening and assessment, (2) income employment service specialist, (3) employment service specialist, and (4) eligibility technicians/benefits analyst. Approximately 150 employees of the San Mateo County Human Services Agency and about 200 other adults have attended courses in the human services certificate program, demonstrating an eagerness to learn new skills related to their new work roles.

Students come from a wide range of backgrounds, work experience in the human services field, and preparedness for college course work. Some students have not been in a classroom for over twenty years. The diversity in skill level and occupational background is both valuable and challenging for meeting everyone's training needs.

The Community Colleges

All three community colleges in the San Mateo County district (College of San Mateo, Cañada College, and Skyline College) were invited to develop the human services program. Initially, Skyline College decided not to actively participate in the collaboration. During its first year, the certificate program was launched at the College of San Mateo and Cañada College. Today, most of the courses are administered at Cañada College. To better serve the needs of the community, courses will eventually be located at all three community colleges in San Mateo County as well as other community and agency sites in the county.

THE VALUE OF THE COLLABORATION

The human services certificate gives human services employers in the county the opportunity to train their employees inexpensively and conveniently. As long as employment and case-management skills are needed, the current curriculum will provide San Mateo County human services providers with an effective way to learn them. Because the curriculum is dedicated to responding to the needs of the community and its employers, any shifts in the service delivery of human services will be reflected in the certificate's curriculum. Because the human services certificate program is now a part of permanent curricula, the community college can also offer any resident of San Mateo County an accessible, low-cost opportunity for career advancement in human services occupations.

Although the courses taught in the human services certificate program are designed to be as relevant and practical as possible, a trainer for the human services agency reports that its employee training events have also become more purpose directed and relevant to the work performed at the

agency than earlier training. For example, staff members are invited to bring real case examples to class for instruction purposes. Assisting in the development of the human services curriculum also gave the agency a chance to further articulate the competencies they require from staff.

The development of a human services certificate program emerged at a time when providers of human services needed to be more skilled than ever before. With lifetime restrictions on the receipt of welfare benefits and the need to assist the hardest to serve, providing skillful employment assistance and case-management services related to client self-sufficiency requires the acquisition of increasingly complex intervention methods. For example, making thorough assessments of each client's employability, job readiness, and planning for long-term self-sufficiency requires case managers to demonstrate considerable interpersonal skills to assist clients facing multiple biological, psychological, or social obstacles. One student in the program reported that the skills she has learned in the courses would easily transfer to any human services agency since, "you need to do case management and know how to interact with others anywhere."

Challenges

As noted, instructors are challenged by the diversity of students' abilities. Students generally attend the program for one or more of the following reasons: (1) it is a mandated part of their employment, (2) desire to advance their service delivery skills, and/or (3) to pursue specialization with a particular client population (e.g., mental health, substance abuse). Although instructors frequently remind students that the course is based on general models of service delivery, students sometimes challenge the instructors by stating that the course content does not reflect "what happens in my agency" or "what we do in my unit."

Another area of diversity is the students' readiness for community college course work. Many students in the program have not been in a classroom for as many as fifteen or twenty years. Simply dealing with the basic skills required to successfully complete a college course can consume a great deal of classroom time. Study habits, note taking, organizing materials, coping with stress, and test taking are all areas with which many students need assistance. As a result, instructors make an effort to include these basic skills throughout course materials. In addition, some students must deal with their own mental illness or learning disabilities.

Because many students are also employed full-time, they often feel overwhelmed by completing course requirements in addition to their work responsibilities. For example, employees of the human services agency were learning a completely new computer system at work, while also expected to

learn new intervention strategies in the courses. One student also reported that in the intensive six-week courses such as "case management," it is difficult to learn so much material in a short period of time. Therefore, instructors often play a supportive and motivational role, reassuring the overwhelmed students and reminding them about how they are growing professionally.

Finally, instructors are challenged by the contradictions that sometimes emerge while teaching students about current service delivery methods. For instance, one instructor reported that, although his students from the San Mateo County Human Services Agency believed that the concepts being taught (e.g., extensive assessment of client needs) were valuable and important, their high caseload would prevent them from really practicing the concepts. Fortunately, the agency was very responsive to this feedback and actually decreased the caseloads of workers to make the service delivery goals more attainable and the new learning more achievable.

In the fall of 1999, courses from the curriculum were offered for the first time on-site at the San Mateo County Human Services Agency. Obviously, this contributed to the program's convenience and its responsiveness to both employees and clients. The human services agency is also offering employees a 50 percent compensation for attending the courses, whereby half of the time in class is considered on the agency's time and the other half on the individual's own time. Employees report that this convenience would increase their likelihood of enrolling in the courses. The human services agency also offers tuition reimbursements to employees who enroll in the certificate courses. The goal is to encourage more employers to offer courses on their own premises.

Similarly, current and former welfare clients are encouraged to supplement their work-first experiences with these learning opportunities as a way to advance their careers. In addition, course credits earned in the program may soon become transferable to other colleges in the state, thereby promoting the importance of educational advancement. In addition, interest is growing in developing a practice-based internship to augment the human services certificate program.

The curriculum advisory board has been expanded to involve a larger number of community members and human services employers. This will not only contribute to the responsiveness of the curriculum to employers' needs, but also encourage other employees in the community to participate in human services certificate courses. The additional members may also serve as guest lecturers and provide future internship or apprenticeship sites. Finally, grants are being actively pursued to further develop and disseminate both the curriculum and a manual of best practices that promote quality and consistency in human services instruction.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. The extensive investment in curriculum development by the community colleges, the county human services agency, and a wide variety of human services agencies throughout the community helps to make the curriculum relevant and timely. Curriculum developers need to invest substantial time to design a program that truly meets the training needs of employers throughout the community and does not replicate training opportunities already offered.
2. The involvement of agency-based professionals as instructors in a human service certificate program contributes to its credibility in the eyes of the students, the agencies, and the community. Staff members of human services agencies, particularly familiar with the work-based situations confronted by students, are instructors who help to ensure that course content is reality based and pragmatic.
3. Fostering collaborations and community involvement contributed greatly to establishing a successful human services certificate program as a permanent part of the local community colleges' curricula. The individuals and agencies involved in the development of this program were willing to recognize the limitations of their own services and the value of partnering with others to meet the training needs of staff and better serve human services clients in the county.
4. Human services staff need an increasing level of training and professionalism to effectively meet the changing and complex needs of clients. The curriculum will need to reflect these changing needs if the human services certificate program is going to survive and thrive.

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