

DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAM

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UNIVERSITY AND INTERNSHIP BACKGROUND

Kingsborough Community College (KCC) is part of the City University of New York system of colleges, located in Brooklyn, New York. Under the leadership of President Regina Peruggi, an enthusiastic supporter of service learning, Kingsborough Community College has been named to the President's Higher Education Community Service 2007 Honor Roll which recognizes colleges and universities nationwide that support innovative and effective community service and service learning programs.

The Mental Health and Human Services Program is housed in the Behavioral Sciences department and has been a vital and growing program since its inception. At present, the program has approximately 325 human services majors, the majority of whom proceed to earn their Bachelor of Arts and Master of Sciences degrees in social work, psychology, human services, and other related professions. Some of the internship placements include domestic violence shelters, nursing homes, psychiatric day treatment programs, programs for the developmentally disabled, and community advocacy programs.

CREATION OF THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OUTREACH PROGRAM

In the fall semester of 2005, the Mental Health and Human Services Program established a community advocacy course in which students could earn required credits towards their major and also work among Kingsborough's immediate and surrounding population. In 2005, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) reported that two-thirds of entering college students believed it was very important to help others, which is the highest percentage in the last 25 years; not only do college students do "nice" things when they volunteer, they do necessary things to help build and improve our communities, especially in times of crisis (www.nationalservice.gov/honorroll).

The faculty agreed that there was a need to create an internship that focused on prevention and contributed to the community. The application of faculty and student capital to address community needs is re-establishing itself as a framework for the public mission of higher education which, after an analysis of local community problems and issues, can be applied to community-based solutions and actions for renewal as seen through community service learning, which can represent an important structure for community revitalization, especially linking to existing programs and models for renewal (Winchell & Ponder, 2007). Following a

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service learning model, the faculty decided to create a domestic violence prevention program with the intention of reducing domestic violence through education. The students decided to name this program A.C.E. (Awareness, Courage and Empowerment) and, under the guidance of Dr. Charles Guigno, the students work towards educating the community on issues of domestic violence and its prevention.

The structure of the Domestic Violence Outreach Program (DVOP) is very unique in that the students create and run their own agency as opposed to the traditional service learning model of being placed in an existing agency, where typically two to four students are primarily supervised by agency social work staff. In employing a humanistic approach to teaching, it provides an environment that liberates and empowers students to become self-reliant and self-initiating (Guigno, 2008); in this case, the faculty's role is that of a consultant, lecturing to encourage students to explore their own ideas rather than utilize the traditional teacher-student dynamic. This conveys to the teen and young adult students – who are teaching teens – to not let other people control them, which is what makes the program effective.

STUDENT GOALS

The goals of the program for the student learner are multifaceted:

- Students will understand and appreciate the value of utilizing a community advocacy and prevention approach internship in a human services program.
- Students will attain knowledge and an understanding of the details of how such a unique internship program is developed, including its organization, faculty and student input, the evolution of the program, and an evaluation of the strengths and successes of the program (as well as any problems or issues that need to be addressed).
- Students will understand and appreciate the benefits of this community service and prevention internship, including the empowerment of both the student and community participants.
- Students will acquire the tools necessary to replicate this internship model for their human service program.
- Students will take a pro-active role in their education.

PROJECT AND STUDENT ASSESSMENT

In the A.C.E. program, student assessment includes the following components:

- brief surveys for assessing the participant's opinion of the presentation
- the number of "hits" on the student created website
- debriefing sessions to see what went well and what could be improved

- tracking the increase in the number of presentations and inquiries
- a survey of student satisfaction with the experience; the individual classes are then encouraged to collect and analyze data from this survey
- faculty feedback
- the degree of self-efficacy of the students
- class attendance, grades, and participation, and
- the student's self-assessment of their performance in the course.

STUDENT CRITERIA FOR PLACEMENT

Each semester, approximately ten students are accepted into the A.C.E. program. Each student must have exhibited an interest in the field of domestic violence and community advocacy. The faculty also makes an effort to choose a group that is culturally diverse. Past classes have been made up of a mix of Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Eastern Europeans and students from the Caribbean. The students have also spoken several languages including English, Spanish, Creole, French and Russian. Chronologically, students ranged between the ages of 18 to 45, and both males and females were represented. Each student brought with them experiences from their own cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds which influenced their own perceptions and understanding of domestic violence and dating violence. For example, one student was a 19-year-old who had never dated seriously while another was in her mid thirties, married with a child at home. Some have had direct experience with domestic violence while others have had strictly academic exposure to the problem.

STUDENT TRAINING

Initially the students are required to attend a 10-hour Domestic Violence workshop hosted by Joseph Samalin, a Domestic Violence Outreach Coordinator. Through this workshop the students are introduced to the different aspects of domestic violence. This includes identifying domestic violence in its different forms: physical, verbal, sexual, and emotional, as well as learning how to effectively educate potential victims by highlighting warning signs of an abusive relationship, and learning about cycles of behavior that can potentially lead to physical violence. Students also learn about the legal rights of the victims and the overwhelming prevalence of abuse among both married couples and dating adolescents. Finally, the students learn how one can avoid unhealthy relationships and nourish healthy ones. Upon the completion of the training, the students are ready to help pass on this knowledge to the community.

STUDENT ACTION – INFORMING THE PUBLIC

Once the students have finished the training component of the program they become a part of the A.C.E. program. They serve as a board of directors and implement ideas in the mold of a not-for-profit corporation. Each semester is intended to be unique to that individual student group. Students in the program do their own research (under the

supervision of a faculty member) and come up with new ways to reach out to others in the Kingsborough community. Students are given creative freedom and are encouraged to design and implement an outreach program that they feel will effectively help members of the wider community. This approach has proven to be successful over the last two years. A.C.E. students utilize activities such as setting up information tables around the Kingsborough campus with the intention of helping educate their fellow students and distributing information regarding the frequency of dating violence, warning signs, hotline numbers, names and addresses of counseling centers that provide support and guidance for victims of domestic violence, and how to write and enforce an effective safety plan.

Another exciting student generated activity for assisting victims of domestic violence was the collection and distribution of toys for children in domestic violence shelters. During the holiday season of 2006, students asked members of the Brooklyn community to donate toys for children in domestic violence shelters.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CONFERENCES AND AUDIENCE RESPONSE

In addition to raising awareness and providing information to high school and college-age students, A.C.E. members are actively involved in presenting information to the professional community. Most recently, the students were invited to participate in a domestic violence awareness conference sponsored by the Urban Resource Institute, a community outreach organization dedicated to helping victims of domestic violence. The A.C.E. members were invited because of their unique perspective and insight regarding domestic violence victims. The intention of the conference was to raise awareness for mental health professionals in the community about the frustration and trauma that domestic violence victims go through. The A.C.E. dramatization included relaying their own experiences in the domestic violence program and demonstrated to the audience the early warning signs of domestic violence and how quickly it can lead to serious physical violence.

Many of the students who perform in the demonstration are victims of domestic violence. As victims, these students not only add credibility to the demonstration but also, as many have reported, this experience has given them an opportunity to resolve

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issues that they have a need to express and share with others. Students have reported to faculty that they no longer feel alone and feel a sense of empowerment. One A.C.E. member appreciated that the conference touched all the dynamics of domestic violence in the power wheel, while another member stated it was phenomenal, very

inspiring, truly uplifting, and educational in purpose, and that it should be mandated on all college campuses. Another member commented that “domestic violence has no balance”.

Audience feedback to the demonstration “How to Prevent Domestic Violence” has been both positive and favorable. A social worker commented that she had to leave the room for some parts of the presentation because it was heartbreaking seeing a survivor. Students have verbally approached faculty and A.C.E. members and expressed their gratitude and appreciation. Students have also written letters; one stated “I want to thank you, because I didn't realize I was a victim of domestic violence until I saw your presentation.” Another student wrote to the group “seeing the demonstration was like a flashback to a past relationship. The highlight of the presentation was when the information on a safety plan was presented to me afterwards.” The A.C.E. demonstration and dramatization has proven to be so successful that the A.C.E. students have been asked to present their presentation in several public schools around the New York City area, at health fairs, and in other local colleges.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Student feedback has been extremely favorable. Over the past five semesters the students involved in the A.C.E. program have helped inform and support the Kingsborough community. Presently, they are working towards broadening their horizons by extending their efforts over the New York City area. In addition to having a significant impact on the community, students have an opportunity to learn within an enriched environment, develop and practice professional skills, and increase their self-esteem and self-confidence. Several students have been given job opportunities as a result of their participation in the A.C.E. Program.

Many A.C.E. students report that being involved in the program is one of the most meaningful and important learning experiences that they have had in their academic careers. Students have also reported that their experience in this program has helped them personally, emphasizing the power of this type of service learning domestic violence class. For example, one student said “participating in A.C.E. allowed me to help my sister. Her husband was abusing her. Together she and I created a safety plan for her and I felt so good that I was able to help!” Another A.C.E. student was a victim of domestic violence and stated that participating in this program for a semester helped her more than all of the years she spent in therapy. Another student commented “I wanted to thank you for empowering me with the knowledge that helped me with the biggest choice of my life...I just left my husband. He was very abusive to my children and me for years. Words can't express my feelings...Keep up the good work.”

A.C.E. students also say that being able to make a difference and being taken seriously as a professional has increased their self-esteem and has given them the confidence they need to begin their career. Comments include:

“I became more self-confident about presenting what I believe...seeing all the compliments and positive feedback made me feel stronger and I thought of myself that I can do anything, and I can accomplish anything I want.”

“Each time I tell someone about A.C.E. or refer them to a number of resources my heart swells with pride and hope...Each time I present information with my co-workers I leave knowing that there is someone that will take our message to heart and spread our words of encouragement and wisdom.”

On numerous occasions the A.C.E. students stated that their work saved the lives of others with comments such as:

“I feel that every time we leave a classroom we could have saved a life, gave someone the information on how to get help or stopped a person from entering a dangerous relationship.”

“After every presentation someone is left crying or trying very hard to get information about domestic violence, which leads me to believe that either they are in a domestic violence situation or knows someone who is. I know after every presentation I've saved a life.”

“Nothing describes the feeling of knowing that I changed someone's life. It made me feel very important to know that people actually cared about what I said and they actually wanted to listen.”

DISCUSSION

In the future the Mental Health program at Kingsborough hopes to expand the A.C.E. program to include other target populations. The success of this program illustrates that community-based service learning and advocacy is good for students and good for the community. Based on the success of A.C.E., Dr. Guigno wants to reach out to faculty members in other colleges to help them develop programs based on the A.C.E. model, especially emphasizing that it is important to have a relationship with an outside experienced agency. This agency should utilize domestic violence-related research, outreach, education, special events, recruitment and meetings, and advocacy (Day One). Faculty and students are also working together, gathering data and information that will be used for a research project that will be useful in helping prevent domestic violence. Specifically, this entails systematic evaluation research on the effect of community advocacy and its impact on student participants and on people who attend the presentations or receive one-on-one domestic violence education.

Underlying the pedagogy of service learning is the belief that a central mission of civic education is to produce active, engaged citizens (Delli-Carpini & Keeter, 2000). The Domestic Violence Outreach Program (DVOP) is an example of the direction that other human service programs may want to consider. DVOP provides students with the opportunity to become empowered as they give back to their community and participate in a crucial prevention effort that engages fellow college students and high

school students. Internship projects have helped educate and engage community members in this pilot project to prevent domestic violence.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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