

CHALLENGES TO ADOPTING AND SUSTAINING FAMILY-FOCUSED COMPETENCIES IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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EACH OF THE PRESENTERS of this invitational symposium, *State of the Science: Nurses and Social Workers Supporting Family Caregivers*, identified the saliency of family caregiving issues for practice, research, and the education of professional social workers, caregivers, the business community, and the public to enhance support of family caregivers. Numerous suggestions for curriculum and training were put forth, such as creating interdisciplinary caregiving curricula for nurses and social workers and including caregivers in the training.

As concluding comments to this supplemental issue, my focus is on the implications for professional BSW and MSW social work education. I also concur with the presenters' recommendations that changes in doctoral education; in policy, research, and practice; in training with family caregivers; and in alliances with direct care workers are all critical to supporting family caregivers. In the short term there is a compelling need to address the continuum of social work education, beginning with preparing human service graduates in community colleges; then BSW, MSW, and doctoral programs; and lastly, lifelong learn-

ing opportunities of continuing education and licensure and certification requirements. As noted by several presenters, certification or licensure in key elements of family care such as assessment and care coordination, and national competency standards for care managers would help ensure that nurses and social workers have an appropriate foundation of knowledge and, over time, influence what and how competencies are taught in social work field and classroom curricula.

I fully endorse the symposium recommendations that nurses and social work students need to acquire competencies for effective practice with family caregivers of older adults. At the same time, as a long-time social work educator, I am realistic about the challenges of adding new competencies and content to professional degree curricula that inherently have to address a wide range of practice interventions, populations, and fields of practice along with the intersections of practice and policy. Drawing on my 10 years of experience with Hartford-funded curricular development projects, I briefly suggest some change strategies and lessons learned to promote the education of

138 JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

social workers to be competent in their work with family caregivers.

Making the Case for Change

A primary theme of the symposium was the need for a change in the mindset of social work practitioners and educators to redefine the client system to include both the patient and caregiver, and to recognize family caregivers as full partners in care. This change in mindset has numerous implications for professional education, including continuing education. An initial challenge is to craft a compelling rationale or case statement to convince faculty, students, academic administrators, and community partners of the need for such a change in how the client system is defined.

Connecting with the personal experiences of key stakeholders is likely to be an effective beginning strategy, because nearly all adults have some experience with family caregiving of older relatives, friends, or neighbors; even if they are not directly involved in the care process, they know someone who is. In fact, convincing stakeholders of the importance of addressing family caregiver needs may be easier than making the case for geriatric content per se, because caregiving is an issue that cross-cuts the life course and multiple fields of practice. Another strategy to make the case could be to identify examples of how a family-centered approach has been effective in other fields of practice, such as child welfare.

Development of Competencies

The need for competencies for social workers and nurses to work effectively with family caregivers of older adults, including skills for effective interdisciplinary team collaboration,

was another primary symposium theme. Indeed, the development, implementation, and measurement of family-centered competencies provide the overall framework for implementing curriculum changes.

The social work profession is at a pivotal position to adopt such competencies, given the competency-based approach of the 2008 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (CSWE, 2008). The EPAS identifies characteristic knowledge, values, skills, and resulting practice behaviors that may be used to operationalize curriculum and assessment methods. In addition to 10 core competencies required by the EPAS, both MSW and BSW programs may develop competencies that are consistent with their individual missions and goals and their larger context, including demographic changes and workforce needs (EP1.2). Programs are to make explicit what such a context comprises and how their mission and goals take account of this context in the education of social work professionals. Such attention to the larger context provides a mechanism for programs to consider the practice and policy implications of the growing number of family caregivers of elders nationally and locally. Any effort to define family caregiver competencies must then link the competencies with appropriate content and teaching resources—readings, assignments, case studies, in-class exercises—as well as outcome measures to assess student attainment of competencies.

Obtaining the Buy-In of Key Stakeholders

Perhaps the major lesson learned from the Hartford-funded CSWE Curriculum Development Projects—the CSWE Strengthening

Aging in Geriatric Education in Social Work (SAGE-SW), the Geriatric Enrichment in Social Work Education (GeroRich), and the national Center for Gerontological Social Work Education (Gero-Ed)—is the necessity to devote time, attention, and other resources to securing the support of key stakeholders: academic administrators, faculty, students, and community partners. Their acceptance of the change process is required not only to infuse new competencies into existing courses but also to sustain and institutionalize modifications in social work programs' curriculum and organizational structures.

Although the support of deans and directors is essential for curricular change, it is not sufficient, because curriculum is the faculty's domain. Faculty support of the need for students to be competent in working with family caregivers of elders is essential. As a first step, faculty members need to decide the courses to target for the embedding or infusing of such competencies. Because all social workers, regardless of whether they are geriatric specialists, will work in some capacity with family caregivers, a strong case can be made for infusing family-centered competencies in the BSW required generalist or MSW foundation curriculum. Within MSW programs the advanced or specialist classroom and field curriculum also is ideal for infusing competencies and content related to family caregiving of elders. This targeting of advanced courses should encompass areas of specialization other than gerontology, because students who specialize in health care, mental health, or substance use, for example, will frequently encounter family caregivers of older adults. Accordingly, advanced courses organized by

methods, whether clinical practice, policy, or macropractice, are conducive to the infusion of assessment and evidence-based intervention skills that prepare social workers to conceptualize the client system to include both elders and caregivers.

But obtaining faculty agreement on the need for family-centered competencies and identifying relevant courses are not sufficient for sustainable curricular change to occur. Faculty resistance to adding new competencies and content to their courses is to be expected, given the expanding knowledge base combined with constraints on curriculum inherent in accreditation and the 2-year time frame for full-time professional education. Most faculty members already feel that their courses are full and that they cannot add one more thing without giving up content that they already deem important (Hooyman, 2006).

Once the faculty reaches agreement on which foundation and advanced curriculum to target, faculty resistance can be reduced by strategies to assist them with identifying the intersections between their teaching and research interests with family caregivers of elders across the life course. Whether faculty's primary interests are mental health, disabilities, interpersonal violence, or even child welfare, issues of family caregivers of elders are salient and can be related to practice and policy content that faculty members already teach. Intersections of family-centered practice with areas of diversity by race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, spirituality, and functional ability also need to be made explicit. The strength and empowerment approaches distinctive to social work

140 JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

also readily lend themselves to conceptualizing family caregivers as partners in care. Identifying and building on such intersections is likely to foster faculty receptivity to new competencies and content. Proponents of the infusion of family caregiver competencies in foundation and advanced curricula must then provide faculty with user-friendly and readily adaptable teaching materials—readings, case studies, in-class exercises—that will facilitate their teaching the necessary knowledge and skills along with using assignments and other measures of competency attainment. Symposium presenters recommended a variety of educational methods, including role-playing, multimedia approaches, and Web-based teaching strategies that could be used to prepare family-competent students as well as current practitioners.

Students are also key stakeholders. Although recruiting social work students to geriatric social work placements and careers remains a challenge nationwide, students may be more receptive to classroom content and field placement experiences focused on family caregivers, because nearly all social work students tend to see themselves as working with families and are likely to encounter multigenerational families. Additionally, many social work students are likely to have personal experiences with family caregiving of elders, perhaps seeing first-hand the challenges their parents face in caring for older relatives. Experiential activities with family caregivers, including interdisciplinary home visits suggested by some presenters, and involving family caregivers and paid direct care workers in the training of social work students, are

other ways to “hook” students on the need to learn skills to support family caregivers.

Social work educators committed to such curricular changes must also obtain the buy-in of community partners, particularly field instructors who are central to students’ competency-based learning. Time and attention will need to be devoted to training community partners to view the client system and unit of intervention as both the elder and family caregivers. As has occurred with the Hartford-funded Practicum Partnership for Aging Education Project (formerly known as the Practicum Partnership Project), faculty field coordinators based in academic settings can assist field supervisors with ways to measure student competency-attainment.

These concluding comments highlight only a small portion of the range of strategies that can be used to obtain key stakeholders’ support for creating and sustaining curricular changes. Attention to how to maintain curricular changes, through working with appropriate curriculum governance units and institutionalizing family caregiver competencies syllabi, curriculum, and the program’s mission statement, are effective sustainability strategies. If social work—along with nursing—can agree as a profession on the need for such family-focused education for all students, well-tested strategies and tools to achieve and sustain that goal are already available through www.GeroEdCenter.org. The strength of these materials is that they were developed from the “bottom up” by faculty who were struggling with how to garner their faculty colleagues’ support for curricular change. These strategies have been designed and tested by faculty and found to

work in building student competencies. As such, they can provide essential lessons learned in advancing the symposium's curricular and teaching recommendations.

References

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