

Cycle 1 BEL Program Lessons Learned July 1, 2008-June 30, 2010

These *Lessons Learned* were gathered from Year 1 and 2 Progress Reports from Cycle 1 BEL grantees. *Italics* have been added by the CSWE Gero-Ed Center to highlight key phrases and edits have been made for brevity and clarity.

Initial Planning

One key lesson learned is to start *early planning and implementing* the oral history schedule and matching process. In addition, keep at it. At times, *flexibility and planning for extensions made the process so much more pleasant for all concerned*. We learned that *involving all parties in the planning as much as possible was a key strategy*.

Plan early. *Agencies need time to understand rotation models and find opportunities for students to participate in.*

Trust the process. If your students have some skills, are prepared for what we expect of them, and are placed in a relatively new situation, they will rise to the occasion

We learned to not be too grandiose in the planning of activities. *A few excellent learning activities that are accessible to a range of social work students* would be a great asset to attracting students.

Overestimate the time needed to complete projects with community partners. Everything from IRB to meeting times has taken longer than I expected. If you think you will be able to complete a research project in one semester, *plan on doing a pilot project for the first semester* and work out the kinks before broadening the project.

Anywhere worth going takes time and effort; I have realized that projects of this scale and scope take time to develop and revise. *I have learned that I need to count on at least three times the amount of time I THINK I will need for a given task*. I have learned to surround myself with committed, focused, task-oriented people to balance out my skills.

I don't take anything for granted. I thought it would be easy recruiting practicum students, particularly since I could pay them – it wasn't. I thought it would be difficult recruiting research students – it wasn't.

Be prepared for a lot of interest. While this is obviously desirable on one level, it necessitates a very different level of organization and coordination.

Sometimes all you have to do is ask to successfully complete an innovation. We anticipated barriers within our department and college. We anticipated barriers finding participants. We anticipated experiencing negative reactions from our students. And we were wrong. We have learned that in this

instance we have received support from our academic connections, community connections, and students. When barriers have arisen these resources have helped us overcome them.

Course Selection

Choosing the type of activities that students will engage in is dependent on the course in which the activity will take place. Requiring a "conversation" over three sessions can allow students to be creative in how they arrange the conversation. For example, one student and her interviewee played board games while they chatted. Another interviewee insisted on cooking a meal for the student since it was something she no longer did very often because her family lived out of state. By their reports the students were very good about letting their interviewees "lead" the interactions perhaps because this took the pressure off the students who were nervous about what to do.

Incorporating an enhanced unit in a general course (HBSE vs. a stand alone course on aging) *takes some finessing of the syllabus.* The goal in an HBSE course is to highlight the focus area without disadvantaging the other life cycle areas.

When paired courses are utilized to implement the experiential learning activity, *the necessity of constant communication and shared planning between the instructors in the paired courses cannot be emphasized enough.* This factor is crucial in keeping the two courses' timelines consistent for the instructional needs related to the experiential learning activity (i.e., oral history assignment), the experiential learning activity's own implementation needs, and the needs related to timing of other course content and relevant course assignments.

Because this project was embedded in an across-the-life-cycle course, there was not enough leeway in the course to create a major focus on older adults. In addition, the "older adult" chapters in the text would normally come towards the end of the course leaving little time for students to complete their face-to-face interaction. *To address these complications (1) explanation of the older adult project was put into the syllabus so that students could know early on what was coming and to think about an older adults they could use for the project (2) early in the semester I had the students read the chapters on older adults in the text so that they would have some knowledge before interacting.*

It is not easy to combine expectations of social work and non-social work students. In the spring diversity class we had a number of non-social work majors, and their expectations and level of participation was so much less than our own students. Thus, getting these students to a point of understanding our methodologies and expectations, especially in field versus classroom activities, was difficult.

Activity Scheduling

Experiential activities need to be infused during class time or be well-planned in advance so students who have children, or who work after school hours, can attend.

Our persistent challenge has been in the area of planning and scheduling. Finding the students and the interviewees were not a problem. However, matching schedules, troubleshooting unanticipated illnesses, and rescheduling due to technology restraints were time-intensive and frustrating. Specifically, most of

our students have full-time academic schedules, hold full-time jobs, are parents with children, or caregivers for their parents and their time is limited. Our older adults had also many time restrictions due to driving concerns, jobs, volunteer commitments, and family responsibilities. *We learned early that working on scheduling even before the semester started was crucial. We also learned to use multiple ways of communicating with students and older adults (phone, email, snail mail, visits to senior center, and multiple points of contact on our campus) and follow up reminder calls to both students and older adults.*

In the first year, Mondays were used as a rotation day. This was changed to Wednesday for the second year as many holidays fall on Mondays in the spring. This past year, Fridays presented a problem as many agencies were forced to shut down on selected Fridays due to budget constraints. Next year all rotations will be on Wednesdays.

Class Assignments

The reflection paper assignment was most informative and helpful not only for teaching the course *but in assisting the students to reflect on their preconceived notions and their new willingness to consider working with older adults.*

The individual poster session provided an opportunity for each student to research their topic and therefore provided some diversity in learning. I think having the opportunity to explain their research via the highlights of their posters allowed them to take a topic from thought to literature review, research, interviews or focus groups, to developing a brief explanation of major points to share, and overall brought fusion to their learning.

To prepare the students' for their aging related rotations, we assigned two journal articles and one textbook on aging related issues. Although suggested, it was not required for students to complete the readings prior to starting the aging rotations. *Next year, we will require these to be read before the students begin rotating through the first aging related agency.*

Selecting Partners

It is important for the students to have direct contact with older adults from different economic, educational levels, and racial/ethnic cultures. There is no "one" type of elder. I think this helps demystify and rid stereotypes. The students actually had "fun" talking with the elders in the various settings/facilities.

Recruiting older adult partners proved to be more difficult than anticipated. *We learned that it is important to begin recruiting partners earlier, as many partners already had plans on the event dates.*

We had a range of group experiences the first year. Some of the nursing facilities seemed to provide a better learning experience than others. *To address these issues, I identified social work contacts at all sites and held a group planning session. The planning session was helpful for exchanging ideas and helping non-social work contacts to get a better feel for social work with groups.* I must say that I also saw a "positive peer pressure" develop, perhaps because the facilities are for-profit and there is certainly competition for clients and student interns.

One of my concerns was the appropriateness of residents for group work at some of the facilities. There was a wide range of cognitive and physical ability among the residents of the nursing facilities. My strategy to address this issue was to add a group at a community senior center, which worked wonderfully. This group's members had a high level of cognitive functioning on average and were also a group of somewhat younger, more independent people. *The inclusion of this new group expanded the age range and living environment of older adults involved in our BEL project, and students were able to make comparisons and see the interactive nature of person and environment.*

If possible, have students do their group work in a variety of settings, including nursing facilities and senior centers or other settings with younger and/or more independent clients. This allows for great discussion of the diversity among the older population as well as the role of environment and its interaction with personal factors.

Maintaining Partner Relationships

Hold meetings to address agency liaisons' concerns or to help with planning experiences. We anticipated that personnel would be too busy to attend yet another meeting, but, all of the agency representatives were disappointed when we cancelled a meeting in January.

Partnership and a good working relationship with agency/site are key. These relationships can develop over time but it is important to ensure that the site agency has their needs met and are fully invested in the project and will help see it through. It might be necessary to have higher level administrators involved who could help ensure that the project is successful.

It is important to have back-up sites with which to work. Staffing changes at agencies and possible waning interest on the part of agency staff in our work forced us to find other sites at which we could implement our projects

It is important to know when to terminate the relationship with a site and pull out when problems continue to arise. While something can be learned from even negative situations; it may be better for the students in the long run to change sites. This would help salvage the opportunity for BSW students to experience positive relationships with older adults.

We experienced a difficult relationship with our first agency/site. While the agency initially indicated a strong interest in the project and appeared invested, this changed rather early in the process. The agency was continually overwhelmed with day to day operations and was not available to assist students with their issues in accessing participants. We continued to attempt contact with the agency about problems but it became more difficult and resolution was not possible due to their lack of interest. *It might have been more successful if high level administrators had been contacted about the difficulties.*

Faculty Buy-In

Internally, our planning of the BEL process went smoothly. *Buy-in was accomplished by including the gero-faculty member and BSW Director in the proposal development and project.* This has led to tremendous support from both. For example, the BSW Director includes the BEL project as a standing agenda item at monthly BSW meetings. Updates of the project generate excitement among the BSW

faculty. The Director then reports the summary at the general Faculty meeting. Having GA support for logistics is also tremendously helpful.

Start with high energy, enthusiastic faculty. They are the low hanging fruit who make it easy to implement a project with lots of positive outcomes. Faculty who are too busy, not specifically interested, or resistant can consume the energy of the project and will likely come along later when the pioneering is done.

When implementing an experiential learning activity in such a way that it becomes integrated into your curriculum, *it is essential to have support from all faculty, even if they are only indirectly involved.* Otherwise, the demands of initial planning and implementation of the activity may become an overload for those directly involved if overall programmatic workloads become unbalanced.

Consult with others as much as possible to make the activity as feasible as well as engaging as possible.

I must highlight the *importance of the faculty member's enthusiasm*, knowledge base, and networking with professional gerontologist, and experience teaching the course before the infusion and after. *If the faculty member is unable to share how important the topic, any topic is, the students will not have a "buy-in".*

Talk to faculty teaching the courses, then remind them, then talk to them again. Then *follow-up!*

When planning, implementing, and evaluating an experiential learning activity in a social work program with a very small faculty size (e.g., 2-3 faculty persons) *it is essential to have support from all faculty members even if they are not involved or only indirectly involved.* We cannot emphasize enough how crucial this can be in very small programs. Without it the demands of planning, implementation, and evaluation of the activity may become an overload for those directly involved because of overall social work program demands and workloads becoming unbalanced. In addition, some degree of "buy in" from other faculty members in small programs such as ours is critical, whether it be helping to rebalancing workloads or simply tacit agreement that the infusion of gerontological content and the related experiential learning activity is a worthwhile endeavor.

Student Engagement

Offer incentives to students, no matter how small! I wrote in \$10-20 gas cards for the students and this really helped students to feel their work was valued and that they were getting "paid" for their time. *Even extra credit works as an incentive for students to feel their time was valued.* The incentives do not need to be something tangible. I explained that the skills they gained would help them get into graduate school, land a job, and set themselves apart from other BSW students.

Student groups, Student Social Work Association and Phi Alpha Honor Society, were very enthusiastic partners.

Students in the infused BEL section thought they would be doing extra work in comparison to the other two sections. Once the students were into the semester's work they realized that the gerontology

information was infused into many of the topics discussed and they were then accepting and even felt “special” that they had this opportunity.

Another key lesson learned was that the students loved doing the oral history, practicing their interviewing skills, and learning about older adults and their needs. From the beginning of the semester students were excited about the project (in part due to the feedback from the first semester’s students) and wanted to discuss interviewing skills and how to best implement this oral history project. Some on their own actually practiced a role play to help them get more comfortable with the interview process and to allay nervousness about their own inexperience in interviewing an older adult. In a way, the students took the initiative to ask questions, explore techniques, and learn more about interviewing older adults. The instructor and myself, in many ways, became consultants and guides to students as they sought out information and experience.

Make sure students understand the process. Be clear about what is required and what is optional.

Students realize the value of the learning experience LATER. I have heard from students after graduation, rather than during the experience. I have learned that students often do not know what they will need right away and they often make the choice that is easier, rather than what they need. Students do not enjoy research or statistics (usually) and are resistant to the work and learning curve involved. *I have learned that the best way to get them to engage is to show them how it can benefit them professionally and personally.* I have explained that the experiences can help them get a research assistantship or elevate their skills in the job market. I have tried to connect the experiences as much as I can with the “real world” and I hope that they will come to understand its value later. This has been demonstrated through the 35% increase in students requesting aging-related field placements (but no increase in the BEL mean score on the likelihood that they will do an aging related field placement when I ask them in Research Methods as juniors!)

Student Anxiety, Preconceptions, and Boundaries

"Interviewing" was reframed into having a "conversation," general topics were suggested for the conversation and general hints were given about being in the social worker role - especially "listening" rather than having to always lead the conversation.

Stereotypes about aging don't only keep students away from work with older adults, they sometimes lead them to it. I heard from a number of my students leading groups in nursing homes that they were somewhat disappointed to find that the residents were not what they expected. For example, one student said that she wanted to work with older people because she really respected their wisdom and thought they were "so cute" (yes, she really said that). In working with her group, she discovered that she was having some negative reactions to a few members because they were not particularly "wise" and certainly not what she thought of as "cute." In fact, they were individuals with just as much individuality and diversity as her peers. As a result of this lesson, *I plan to include a discussion of positive stereotypes when we talk about myths and stereotypes about aging, much as I do when I discuss the "model minority" concept in discussions of race and ethnicity.* We often encourage exploration when students say they don't want to work with older adults, and I think we also need to do this when they express a strong desire to do this work.

One of the most significant challenges we experienced implementing our experiential learning activity (an oral history) was managing increased student anxiety about their responsibilities related to the experiential activity and associated student requirements. We observed this in the areas of (a) fear of actually doing an interview with a stranger, (b) an additional layer of apprehension because the stranger to interview would be elderly, often rooted in myths and preconceived notions of the elderly, and (c) performance anxiety pertaining to interviewing an elderly stranger on tape and having skill use subsequently evaluated. We successfully addressed this challenge by (a) beginning to integrate skills especially relevant to direct practice with elders more thoroughly throughout the practice methods course as a whole, and (b) utilizing self-reflective work in class that allowed the students to express, explore, and discuss any issues they were experiencing around having to engage elders who were strangers to them. In doing so, we seemed to help the students feel more prepared to take on the challenge of interviewing unknown elders one-on-one and deescalated students' anxieties about the interview situation.

On several occasions we had students who wanted to get into the helping role more than they needed to or was appropriate. We basically used good supervision/consultation skills with the students to help them become aware that listening itself is helpful, that telling a life story is helpful and they needed to stay with those activities and not move into a role of helper. We learned that it is important to allow students to take up some class time discussing their concerns about the project in general or more specifically and make sure that we knew about what they were not comfortable with.

Unique Aspects of Working with Older Adults

Elders become ill, possibly more frequently than younger folks, and therefore planning needs to occur in case this happens in the middle of the term. (We had one person who had a heart attack in the middle of the project and could not complete and several others we needed to encourage our students to reschedule activities because of illness.)

Be prepared for elders to open up more than one might expect and teach students how to deal with that in these situations. These situations give opportunity for good learning to occur. In both years we had elders open up about old hurts (in the life history project) such as sexual abuse, death of a partner, death of a sibling and students initially expressed some bewilderment about how to proceed in these situations but they learned from them. It is important to keep in touch with students feelings and concerns as the projects progress and deal with those appropriately.

Students enjoyed doing "hands on" research work and elders enjoyed being able to help students learn. I didn't anticipate the spillover effects of the project, such as the improvement in students' practice skills (ie., rapport and keeping residents on task). This was an added bonus!

Data and Analysis

In evaluating BEL experiences, evaluation techniques need to be structured and more measureable. For example, using quizzes or papers, in addition to discussion and reflection journals, would be very beneficial.

Plan ahead regarding data collection, analysis and report writing.

Qualitative data is as important as quantitative data. The students shared so much in their reflection papers that does not appear in the numbers.

Strategies the evaluation team used included being available to both instructors for any in-class activities related to the project. *For example, project staff went to classes to administer the pre- and post-test and describe the project.*

It might be best to also collect qualitative data if there are small sample sizes in order to get at least a thick description of the project.

Pilot testing and clearly defined outcomes: *It is not only important to have a good idea, but to think through how you will measure success ahead of time. Pilot testing really helped me to work out the kinks before starting this project.* I was funded internally for a small pilot project last year which helped me “hit the ground running” for the BEL grant. It really helped me to know what didn’t work the first time, so I could revise and adapt to make the project flow more smoothly. That is not to say we didn’t have problems, but this helped me to have a more realistic idea for this project.

Marketing & Public Awareness

The final major lesson learned was that *students were our best PR people with staff and faculty.* It was exciting this semester to have our office professional tell the instructor and me how the students were talking about the oral histories in her presence and how excited they were about them. She mentioned that she had not heard students talk about a project as much and as positively as ours. Also faculty mentioned to us that students were making favorable comments about their interview experience in their classes.

Publicity and awareness of our efforts to promote gerontology in our curriculum is essential to get buy-in from students, faculty, administration, and community partners. When stakeholders find out that our program received special funding to promote gerontology in our curriculum, they become even more interested in our activities.

The importance of co-curricular activities (i.e. via student groups) and activities in other academic disciplines (political science, of all places) was very powerful in creating "buzz", interest and momentum for Gero-Ed activities and awareness.

Sustainability

For ongoing sustainability of the project, two important tools seem to be having a website that describes the projects and houses project resources and a blackboard page that posts required and recommended readings and activities.

Design the activity so that it could be easily adopted into other courses. For example, I was able to take the BEL material and incorporate it very easily into part of a MSW Social Work Research 2 course. The BSW and MSW presentations in which permission was obtained to share these stories will be archived and able to be shared with other interested students and/or the general public.