The Youth Work Learning Center: Successes and Lessons Learned

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ABSTRACT: In 1979 the Wisconsin Association of Child Care Workers’ dream to create a center where workers and professors could work together on education programs, certification, and research became a reality when the Child Care Learning Center, now called the Youth Work Learning Center (YWLC), was founded at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. Twenty-five years later the center is a primary source of education, training, and research for child and youth care workers in Wisconsin. The author describes the approach developed and the lessons learned.

KEY WORDS: child and youth care education; learning center; professional development.

Introduction

In the 1970s the Wisconsin Association of Child Care Workers (WACCW), an association of workers largely from residential treatment centers, became a founding member of the National Organization of Child Care Worker Associations (NOCCWA), a federation of several state associations of child and youth care workers. Shortly afterwards, using what they had learned from their experience and partners in NOCCWA, WACCW began to develop standards for professional certification and explore options for education programs to help workers meet these standards.

My friend and colleague, Vera Pina, and I co-chaired the certification and education committee. Both of us were child and youth care supervisors in residential treatment centers, members of the board of WACCW, and delegates to NOCCWA. She worked with a group of workers to develop certification standards, and I worked with a group of workers to identify the education needs of workers in Wisconsin. We
had no statistics, but we thought based on participation in some of WACCW conferences, that about 70 percent had at least an undergraduate degree in a related human service area without specific courses or training in child and youth care outside of what they received at their agencies, which also varied considerably. Thus, we felt we had to develop a mix of continuing education (non-credit) and undergraduate and graduate courses.

From the beginning we felt that in order to advance the development of the profession we would have to work towards a bachelor’s degree in child and youth, or at the very least some coursework that could become part of a degree in social work, education, or a number of other fields. To achieve our goals we needed a partnership with a university. We did not want the university to do this for us, however; we wanted to do it with them. Our dream was to create a center where workers, faculty, agency administrators, and policy-makers could work, learn, and develop and teach courses together. We would bring the expertise and experience that came from being on the line and blend it with the expertise and experience of our partners.

At the time, I was a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee (UWM), and since I knew some of the faculty members in education and social work, the board asked me to approach these faculty members to see if they would partner with us. In general the faculty members were open to the idea, but their departments did not have financial resources for new programs, and while the association could offer volunteer help we, like most of the other child and youth care associations in those days, ran mostly on a shoestring budget.

Then a faculty member steered me toward the Dean of the Division of University Outreach (DUO), later renamed the School of Continuing Education, a creative man who saw potential in our partnership and respected our desire to be an integral part of curriculum development and teaching. The more we thought about it, the more DUO seemed like an ideal place for us. It was the home for interdisciplinary programs or programs that did not fit into one of the university’s existing schools and departments, offered continuing education courses, and coordinated interdisciplinary credit courses. Further, unlike many other outreach departments at universities, DUO had tenured faculty, which was important in getting credit courses approved, supporting new programs, and having clout in the university environment and, like the Dean, the DUO faculty embraced our idea.

The Dean offered to employ me for three months to see if I could raise additional funds. So, having my own dream to be a child and youth care professor some day, I ended the direct service part of my career, 11 years working with youth, and began to write grant