Entry to Practice and Beyond: Aspiring to an Accessible Educational Continuum at Ryerson

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ABSTRACT: The School of Child and Youth Care at Ryerson University has, since its inception in 1989, responded to the developing educational aspirations of child and youth care practitioners. The historical roots of the program are examined along with the various modifications made in response to developments in the field. We describe our approach to the challenges of part-time programming and internet-based course delivery. Future goals for the program include laying the groundwork for masters level education at Ryerson, finding the right balance in the post-secondary sector to allow direct entry to as well as advanced standing in a fully developed 4-year B.A. program, and serving a central role in developing both CYC educators and practitioners. At each stage in the development of the Child and Youth Care (CYC) degree completion program at Ryerson, we have attempted to keep our colleagues informed of our activities. The earliest draft of the program was presented at the First International Conference in Vancouver (Hare & McKay, 1985) in which we outlined our proposed response to the growing demand in Ontario for degree-level education in the field. A decade after the first students were admitted in 1989, an article in Children and Youth Services Review (Hare, 1999) described research that assessed student perceptions of the program and aided us in the difficult task of budget-induced program restructuring. As we began to move more vigorously into internet-based program delivery, we again used an international conference, this time in Cleveland, to keep our colleagues up-to-date about what we were up to (Stuart & Hare, 2000). Now, as we move into the next phase of program development guided by the results of recent student surveys, a self-study, and a peer review (School of Child and Youth Care, 2000), we again take the opportunity in this article to share our thoughts and challenges with our colleagues.

KEY WORDS: youthworker education; child and youth care practice; youth development; higher education and youthwork; youth work professionalization; youth worker training; applied development.

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Phase One: The Multi-Disciplinary Perspective of our Program’s History

The degree completion program in child and youth care was designed in response to the need for undergraduate education in the child and youth care field in Ontario. It builds on the practical and theoretical foundation provided by the Child and Youth Worker (CYW) diploma programs in the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT) and represents an explicit articulation between the college and university sectors of post-secondary education. The three-year CYW diploma is the basis of admission and is thus viewed as years 1 and 2 of a 4-year Bachelor of Arts degree. The Ryerson degree-completion program is structured to enable interested students to further their education at the post-baccalaureate level.

When we decided to take the existing diploma-level curriculum as the foundation of the program, we recognized that our program would have to focus on and expand into areas beyond this base. For example, a typical CYW program would emphasize a front-line perspective on practice. Our response was to incorporate a course that adopted an agency or managerial perspective on service provision to encourage students to step back from their immersion in front-line considerations and consider how what they did fit into the larger scheme of services for children and youth.

Further, we recognized that students who wanted to pursue post-baccalaureate education would need a solid introduction to research design and methods, an area that was not necessarily a focal point of their diploma education. At the same time, we wanted to emphasize the applied side of research to increase the likelihood that students would find it interesting or at least useful. Someone from a local agency suggested that they would really appreciate having staff who could do program evaluation research; if we could incorporate such a course it would make students more attractive to employers. We took the hint and developed a required program evaluation course that the employers wanted and that would count toward post-baccalaureate program admission requirements.

In phase one of the program evolution, the structural articulation with the college system led to a multi-disciplinary curriculum that emphasized theories and assumptions of practice, the social and organizational context of practice, and the research literature in the field. The curriculum was structured around the assumption that the students were, in fact, practitioners and that this work experience could be drawn into the courses. The admission requirement that was originally approved at the inception of the program in 1989 called for