

## **Rethinking the Role of Universities in Preparing Undergraduates for Interprofessional Practice**

**By Sylvia Alatorre Alva & Mikyong Kim-Goh**

Proposals to link health and social services to schools are increasingly at the forefront of the policy agenda for school-age children. Colleges and universities are not immune to these changes. There is a perception that postsecondary institutions are insular and that they are not doing enough to solve society's economic and social ills. Indeed, colleges and universities are under ever-mounting pressure from their constituents to be relevant and responsive to the needs of the students they prepare.

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Educational institutions no longer have the luxury of being bystanders in a time of increasing public scrutiny. Indeed, the heightened level of interest and activity in school-linked services challenges postsecondary institutions to prepare prospective teachers with the skills, competencies, and experiences to collaborate in efforts to deliver school-linked health and social services to children and their families. Our premise is that proposals to link schools with a myriad of support programs and services may, to a

large extent, hinge on colleges and universities rethinking their role in preparing undergraduates for integrated practice (Lawson & Hooper-Briar, 1994).

### **Rationale for Preparing Prospective Teachers for Integrated Services**

In many school districts, students and their families are provided a variety of support services. It is not uncommon for schools to have programs that provide nutrition, after-school care, counseling, tutoring, vaccinations, dental care, etc. However, beyond simply providing a wide array of services to children and families, what is needed is an *integration* of these services.

In an integrated services approach, services are provided in a coordinated manner to children and families through collaboratives, which can include teachers, health care providers, counselors, juvenile justice and law enforcement, and social workers. These collaboratives must work in a coordinated manner to address the unique needs of children in a particular community. Because each of these professions has its own purview and specialized services, an integration services perspective challenges us to rethink not only how services are provided but, central to this paper, how we prepare preprofessional students to contribute to the development and implementation of school- and community-based collaboratives.

### **Problems with the Current Curriculum**

Too often undergraduate students experience the college curriculum as fragmented. "Undergraduate education strikes students as a bewildering introduction to diversity: different bodies of knowledge, modes of inquiry, ways of knowing, historical periods, and cultures" (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 12). Separate courses and academic disciplines typically stress particular content and approaches rather than searching for commonalities or making connections between facts. Isolated disciplinary orientations rarely prepare students and faculty to engage in meaningful dialogue *across* disciplinary boundaries.

The New England Resource Center for Higher Education conducted an extensive study of colleges and universities that have attempted to redesign their general education curriculum in recent years. In a telephone survey with faculty and administrators in 71 colleges and universities, they found that faculty were very concerned about "student overspecialization in professional studies" (Kanter, Gamson, & London, 1997, p. 30).

The tension between offering students the "big picture" versus the theories, approaches, and skills of particular disciplines has been at the root of heated debates on many college campuses. In terms of interprofessional education and training, it is clear that undergraduate students need to be given a context and framework for critique of work in a variety of disciplines to understand both the power and

limitations of disciplinary perspectives. Teachers, social workers, nurses, counselors, and child developmentalists all have a unique perspective in how they define and address the needs of children and families. If the goal of interprofessional practice is to have teachers and other professionals see the problems of children and families from a holistic perspective, preprofessional students must be given the opportunities to examine the condition of children and families from a variety of disciplinary frames.

### **Curricular Experimentation**

Interdisciplinary courses can be a valuable way to pursue educational coherence. Interdisciplinary courses "express the interconnectedness of knowledge by presenting multiple perspectives on issues, concepts, texts, and "real world" problems" (Association of American Colleges, 1994, p. 13). At California State University, Fullerton, a school-wide course on the conditions of children and families in Orange County was developed. The "Annual Report on the Condition of Children in Orange County," a community report compiled by the United Way of Orange County, the County of Orange, and the Center for Collaboration for Children at California State University, Fullerton, was used as the framework of this course. The annual community report card measures and analyzes 35 statistical indicators. It provides a snapshot of the conditions of children in four areas: (a) health, (b) educational achievement, (c) economic well being, and (d) safety of home and communities.

Two examples of health indicators are the number of substance exposed infants born in Orange County and the percent of births of teens (age 19 and under) of total births in the county. Examples of educational achievement indicators are the average combined verbal and math SAT scores and the percent of K-12 students receiving special education services by type of disability. The number of students receiving free or reduced and the number of child abuse and neglect reports filed and referred for assessment are two indicators in the economic well-being section of the report. The number of juvenile arrests is an indicator in the section on safety in the home and communities.

A primary goal of the course was to foster, through review and analysis, a greater appreciation of the implications and limitations of specific indicators. Moreover, because key statistical indicators provide only a snapshot of the well-being of children, we used the community report card's indicators as a guide for thinking about and developing effective programs and policies.

Faculty members from several departments in the School of Human Development and Community Services got together to plan and implement this school-wide course. The interdisciplinary team of faculty who designed the course was mindful of and intentional about avoiding some of the problems common to general education courses across the country. The interdisciplinary approach to this course

offered undergraduate students the opportunity to see how theoretical approaches and research questions are expressed in different fields so that they come to appreciate the contributions of various disciplines to dealing with the complex problems of children and families.

### **The Course: Conditions of Children in Orange County**

The Condition of Children in Orange is a three-unit course designed as an upper division General Education course. Its learning goals are to:

- ◆ Analyze the complex nature of the challenges (educational, social, health, economic, political) facing children and families;
- ◆ Integrate a wide array of statistical indicators to form a more holistic view of conditions of children and families;
- ◆ Recognize cultural and geographic variability in the conditions of children and families;
- ◆ Track data trends and analyze their significance;
- ◆ Recognize the benefits of collaborating across disciplines to address the needs and strengths of children and families;
- ◆ Utilize a variety of data collection methods, including quantitative and qualitative methods, to measure the conditions of children and families;
- ◆ Connect research and practice in developing programs and policies affecting children and families; and
- ◆ Access information through the use of technology such as the electronic databases and the Internet, and critically analyze the acquired information.

The course was designed for preprofessional students from a variety of majors who share a common interest in working with children and families (e.g., teachers, early childhood educators, social workers, health educators, nurses, and juvenile justice workers). The course content was designed around the four major sections of the "Annual Conditions Report": (a) Health and Mental Health, (b) Economic Well-being, (c) Educational Achievement, and (d) Safety in Home and Community. For each section, a member of the interdisciplinary planning committee was invited to be a guest lecturer and asked to give an overview of the central issues in their discipline and to address the challenges and opportunities of working within an interprofessional approach. For example, faculty members from Department of Human Services and the Center for Collaboration for Children provided a comprehensive overview of recent changes in the welfare system mandated by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWOA) of 1996. Their presentation also included a discussion of the potential impacts of welfare reform on children and families, an extension of the report's section on economic well-

being. Similarly, faculty members from the Division of Kinesiology and Health Promotion addressed the role of comprehensive school health programs and how community-based agencies can collaborate with schools to support health and wellness programs.

Although faculty members from various academic departments shared their discipline-specific knowledge and expertise, the main thread of the course was to give students the opportunity to analyze the conditions of children and families *across* disciplinary boundaries. The following illustrates some of the course components in relation to key learning goals for students. One of the key goals of the course was for preprofessional students to acquire a sense of what different professionals and disciplines bring to a family in need of multiple services. Students were divided into groups, which had students from a variety of majors (e.g., Human Services, Child and Adolescent Development, Counseling, Health Science, and Nursing) and asked to discuss a brief case study portraying a family experiencing multiple psychosocial problems.

In interdisciplinary groups, the students discussed the circumstances of the case from a variety of disciplines and perspectives (education, social, health, economic, and political). They were then asked to evaluate the information provided in the case study and asked to consider: *What additional information is required to adequately understand the conditions of these children and their family?* The final question was: *How can collaboration between and among professionals help us better address the needs of this family?* Although there were slight variations in their responses, most students agreed that interprofessional collaboration in problem analysis and service delivery helps reduce the risk of needy families falling through the cracks, and allows families to receive comprehensive services perhaps at a reduced cost. At the end of the class session, students were given a written assignment that heightened their awareness of their personal assumptions and theories of change (Weiss, 1995).

Another key goal of the course was to give undergraduate students the opportunity to analyze the complex nature of the challenges (educational, social, health, economic, and political) facing children and families and to connect research and practice in developing programs and policies. Students were asked to select a social problem (e.g., poverty, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy) and to read articles from scholarly journals on this topic and analyze critically these articles in terms of the researchers' assumptions, study design, and interpretations. They also were asked to examine how their own values were reflected in the way they conceptualized the problem and, finally, the potential impact of their personal "theory of change" on the approaches they would endorse in working with children and families (Weiss, 1995). This exercise challenged students to articulate their assumptions and values and to recognize the interconnections between theories of change and practice. In fact, most students evaluated these reflective paper assignments to be "good learning and growth experiences."

By social problem, students were then assigned to an interdisciplinary team and asked to discuss their own thoughts and concerns about this particular problem with their team members. They also were required to identify a school or community-based agency that targets services to this particular social problem. As an interdisciplinary group, students visited a school or community-based agency and conducted extensive interviews with administrators and staff members. They then gave a written account of the mission and function of the school or community-based agency, collaborative practices at the school or community-based agency, and their personal reactions to the site visit. In addition to the written report, each group gave an oral class presentation summarizing their site visit and its relationship to the course content.

Students also were given extensive training in how to access information from electronic databases and the Internet. For example, using the U.S. Bureau of the Census dataset, they constructed a "city profile," which was a comprehensive summary of the demographic characteristics of the city where the school or community-based agency they visited was located. By comparing the demographics of the city profile and what they observed and learned from their site visit to the school or community-based agency, students were able to recognize cultural and geographic variability in the conditions of children and families, and to identify discrepancies in the needs of the community and the services that the agency was providing.

Students analyzed the statistical indicators in the "Annual Conditions Report," tracked data trends over time, and explored their significance. By critically reviewing the data, students were able to develop a better understanding of the significance of the "Annual Conditions Report" as well as its limitations. For example, the "Annual Conditions Report" provides purely quantitative information, which does not explain the etiology of the problem being tracked nor offers the solutions. By learning about a variety of data collection methods, quantitative and qualitative, students were able to see how combining different data collection methods offers a more comprehensive profile of the conditions of children and families. Moreover, students were challenged to consider the potential obstacles in the compiling data and writing up the "Annual Conditions Report." For example, are there any confidentiality issues or organizational barriers in terms of sharing data with other agencies?

In summary, students were excited about this pilot course, reflected in their comments such as "It's about time you developed a course like this!... Lots of information, but it is something we should know." Through this course, students became more aware of the strengths and deficits of the traditional discipline-based approaches and learned to appreciate the effectiveness and efficiency of interdisciplinary collaboration in working with children and families. They began to see the family as a complex system, with challenges that demand multiple explanations and strategies or solutions that cross the boundaries of "artificial" academic disciplines

and specialties of professions. Students also came to realize the complexities and interconnectedness of various social problems. For example, a major social issue such as teenage pregnancy tends to be closely intertwined with poverty, substance abuse, and community violence. Students were able to recognize the limitations of approaches that target one specific social problem in a vacuum while ignoring the influences of the others. Finally through the extensive use of technology, students developed an appreciation for electronic resources as a significant learning tool, and competencies in accessing and analyzing information.

### **Implications for Higher Education and Further Study**

Early in the course, it became apparent that the undergraduates enrolled in the Conditions of Children in Orange County course had limited experience with interdisciplinary courses. There was a tendency for the students to become frustrated and discouraged with the interdisciplinary focus of the course. Too often, the undergraduate curriculum is compartmentalized by discipline and students who have not taken interdisciplinary courses find it difficult to integrate values, knowledge, and skills on their own. For example, the following student's comment captures the struggles among some students in the class: "This class is interesting, but it seems like there is so much information given to us so quickly that I cannot take it all in. I have learned a lot, but at the same time I feel lost."

To minimize such confusion among the students, the role of the lead instructor was to serve as an anchor by providing a sense of coherence and continuity to the course. Whenever guest lecturers were scheduled, it was important to set aside time before their presentation to provide students with a framework and revisit the themes and content of previous class sessions. It also was valuable to link individual presentations back to the course goals and objectives. After each guest presentation, students were given the opportunity to reflect upon the disciplinary-based information shared and connect it back to an interprofessional perspective. To enhance their learning and critical thinking, students were prompted to do a deeper analysis of the information by asking integrative questions. From what perspective was the information presented? What is the role of professional identity in interprofessional collaboration and how can professional identity become barriers?

In the future, to enhance students' participation and learning, it may be helpful to incorporate peer evaluation components, as well as self-assessment into group projects. For example, students can keep a journal, recording the actual group activities, individual expectations of and reactions to the group process, and what they learned through this process. Students also can evaluate the oral presentations of other groups. Additionally, there needs to be a feedback mechanism through which the agencies receive input from students who visited the facilities. In doing so we are creating a community of learners. The agency staff may be invited to the student oral presentations, or students could present their findings to the agency.

Perhaps the most obvious lesson from our experience is that to accomplish this requires a planning process. The original idea for the course was sparked at a school-wide retreat, where faculty members in the School of Human Development and Community Services were asked to think about the curricular needs of students, in light of external forces and changes impacting the university. A core group of faculty initiated a conversation that eventually led to a planning committee with faculty from the Center for Collaboration for Children and the Departments of Elementary Education, Special Education, Educational Leadership, Child and Adolescent Studies, Human Services, Counseling, Nursing, and Kinesiology and Health Promotion.

A second issue that arises in forming the planning team is balance. The planning team had co-leaders from different disciplines to assure that no one department was allowed to own the "process" and, ultimately, the course. Due to the lengthy process of course development and planning, there is a need to create incentive and rewards for faculty involved in interprofessional education.

Early in our efforts to plan this course, the key issue arose of who should teach the course? It was not clear how we would designate the instructor. Even though the course was designed by the planning committee and included several guest lecturers, university guidelines and procedures call for an "official instructor of record." Again, we wanted to resist the tendency to create a course that "belonged" to one particular department. Our solution was to peg the course at the school-level. The role and responsibilities of the instructor of record will rotate across the various departments in the School of Human Development and Community Service.

Our experience suggests that students and the faculty involved in such interdisciplinary courses find valuable the opportunity to explore and discuss what each discipline defines as important and the strategies they adopt in measuring and addressing the social conditions of children and families. However, one course at one institution is not sufficient to address the anticipated need for teachers and other professionals to work collaboratively to address the complex needs of school-age children and their families. The challenges and barriers that colleges and universities face as we infuse an interprofessional perspective into the curriculum are many (Knapp, Barnard, Brandon, Gehrke, Smith, & Teather, 1994; Lawson & Hooper-Briar, 1994).

Beyond identifying a core group of faculty to develop and teach the curriculum, institutions of higher education must find ways to professionally nurture and reward faculty involvement. For this reason, some institutions have established special institutes or centers, which are designed to facilitate interprofessional involvement. On our campus, the Center for Collaboration for Children has been established for this purpose.

Institutionalizing interprofessional preparation in the curriculum constitutes the biggest challenge. Will the course or the special project exist when the "soft money" has dried up? The institutionalization of interprofessional approaches will



require a careful examination of the internal reward systems of an institution, especially retention, tenure, and promotion, and merit salary systems (Knapp, Barnard, Brandon, Gehrke, Smith, & Teather, 1994; Lawson & Hooper-Briar, 1994). Faculty must perceive that there are rewards and long-term professional opportunities for engaging in interprofessional collaboration. Ultimately, interprofessional practice will require colleges and universities to rethink their mission and how they educate and train teachers and other professionals to meet the complex needs of children, youth, and families.

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Position Announcement:

**Dean of Benerd School of Education, University of the Pacific**

The University of the Pacific, the first chartered institution of higher education in California (1851), invites applications and nominations for a dynamic and innovative leader to assume the position of Dean, Benerd School of Education. The Dean of Benerd School of Education reports directly to the Provost and is a member of the Council of Deans. Pacific is a growing independent, comprehensive university of 5,800 students in 11 schools and colleges. The School of Education is located on the main Campus in Stockton. For further information please visit our web site at [www.uop.edu](http://www.uop.edu).

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The School has a \$6.5 million endowment from Gladys L. Benerd, benefactor, who was one of its graduates. These funds have supported student scholarships, faculty development, technology upgrades, and facility improvements.

*Responsibilities of the Dean:* Provide entrepreneurial leadership and foster collaboration among faculty, students, staff, and administration; support the University-wide commitment to strengthening a student-centered environment; secure internal and external funding for the growth and maintenance of the School's programs; link the activities of the School with surrounding school districts and the community; respond to State and NCATE accreditation standards.

*Qualifications for the Position:* Teaching and scholarship consistent for the rank of tenured full professor; doctoral degree in a discipline appropriate to the School; experience in academic administration; demonstrated experience with managing budgets and managing in an integrated organization; experience with an integrated liberal arts education; commitment to cultural and human diversity; experience in fund raising; history of public school experiences and/or affiliations.

*Environment:* University of the Pacific is a dynamic, independent, comprehensive university offering degrees at the undergraduate, first professional, and graduate levels. The University is located in the beautiful central valley of California bordered by a thousand miles of waterways. It is in the center of six world class vacation destinations, including the beautiful Napa/Sonoma Valleys, the Lake Tahoe-Sierra region, Yosemite National Park, the San Francisco Bay Area, and is 40 minutes from the state capitol, Sacramento. You will find easy driving to other coastal sites such as Monterey Bay/Carmel and Russian River areas. Stockton also won the designation this past Spring as the "All-American City."

*Appointment Date:* The University seeks to fill this position as early as January 1, 2000 (negotiable). Salary is commensurate with qualifications and experience. The University is particularly interested in recruiting diverse candidates to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student population.

*Application:* Send letter of interest, current curriculum vitae, and names and addresses of five references who will not be contacted without prior approval of candidate to: Phillip Oppenheimer, Chair, Search Committee for Dean of Benerd School of Education, University of the Pacific, 3601 Pacific Ave., Stockton, CA 95211-0197; Phone 209/946-2561. Review of applications will begin in the Fall of 1999 and continue until the position is filled. The University of the Pacific is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer. Women and minorities are encouraged to apply.