

Optimizing the informal curriculum: one counselor education program mode

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Abstract:

An annual project involving students and faculty in a collaborative, 6-month planning process that culminates in a half-day program with both didactic and experiential components is presented as a model for creating powerful learning experiences external to the classroom.

Keywords: Education | Counseling | Experiential Learning

Article:

In the early 1900s, John Dewey revolutionized educational philosophy and practice in part through his recognition that the whole student comes to school; thus educators must acknowledge and identify alternative and complementary opportunities for learning beyond the classroom (Dewey, 1938). Following a plethora of studies, particularly in the latter part of the last century, numerous authors have emphasized the importance of extracurricular activities in educational settings and the significant positive relationship that exists between participation in nonclassroom activities and factors such as academic achievement, clinical practice, and student retention (e.g., Cooper, Valentine, Lindsay, & Nye, 1999; Holloway, 1999; McNeal, 1999; Morgan, 1999). Strange (1992) further stressed the importance of the informal curriculum, the totality of learning experiences that occur outside of the structured academic curriculum, in developing the type of complex and sophisticated skills in reflective thinking that have become necessary for problem solving in an increasingly complex global society.

As recognition of the importance of the informal curriculum has increased, barriers to planning such curricula also have emerged. In particular, steadily increasing numbers of nontraditional students, who frequently value family and work obligations over or in addition to schooling, are demanding fewer extracurricular activities and simpler educational systems (Levine, 1993). Recognizing the importance of informal curricula in counselor training, counselor educators are challenged to find ways to integrate such curricula in a manner that is inclusive of all counselor trainees and that results in meaningful learning that extends beyond the classroom setting (Peterson & Myers, 1995). A major source of guidance in program development, The 2001 Standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), defines curricular experiences but not cocurricular experiences, suggesting the need for creative ways to provide effective and engaging informal learning opportunities. One such experience is the Women's History Month Event, a cocurricular program in one counseling department conducted annually for the past 9 years.

In this article, we examine the CACREP standards relating to issues of curricular and cocurricular experiences, as well as requirements for preparation in gender issues, specifically women's issues. Next, a description of the Women's History Month Event, including its evolution, planning, implementation, evaluation, outcomes, and benefits, is presented. Specific information on program topics and the relevance of these topics to gender issues in counseling are described. Suggestions for ways this program could be replicated in other counseling training programs, with similar benefits, and how the process could be applied to other populations and issues are discussed.

GENDER ISSUES IN STANDARDS FOR TRAINING AND PRACTICE

The ethics code of the American Counseling Association (ACA; 1995) states that "counselor educators should make an effort to infuse material related to human diversity into all courses and/or workshops that are designed to promote the development of professional counselors" (F.1.a). A training program that excludes gender as a critical component of analysis and that fails to provide a means by which students can learn about the importance of gender in human growth and development may actually be considered unethical (Daniluk, Stein, & Bockus, 1995). In other words, "an inclusive and ethically responsible curriculum must attend to gender as a core component of counselor training" (Daniluk et al., 1995, p. 294).

Consistent with the ethical standards, CACREP's The 2001 Standards clearly mandates that "information concerning gender ... issues should be an integral part of any counselor's education" (Brooks & Kahn, 1990, p. 70). The inclusion of gender issues in the training of counselors is not limited to Section 2J, the common core curriculum, but includes attention to issues such as the composition of faculty, recruitment of students, research activities, and clinical training (Hoffman & Myers, 1996). However, CACREP's standards address gender issues most clearly in the curriculum requirements for social and cultural diversity, which state that counselor trainees' studies should include a focus on the following in relation to gender: "trends, attitudes, beliefs, theories, competencies, ethical and legal considerations, self-awareness, advocacy and acculturative experiences, including specific experiential learning activities" (p. 61).

Although CACREP's The 2001 Standards is clear in stating that gender issues must be included in counselor education curricula, the specific means by which these issues should be covered are not clearly explicated. Dupuy, Ritchie, and Cook (1994) suggested that gender issues can be incorporated through courses that specifically focus on gender issues or indirectly through infusion into the curriculum of more general courses. Although it certainly can be argued that gender should be a core curricular component of counselor education programs (Daniluk et al., 1995), Dupuy et al. reported that only 31% of master's-level and 43% of doctoral-level counseling programs surveyed offered courses on women's or gender issues. These authors also noted that fewer than half of the responding programs included gender issues either in a separate course or as a part of other courses.

Curricular experiences are defined in CACREP's The 2001 Standards as "planned, structured, and formal teaching activities intended to enable students to learn and apply specific information, principles, values, and skills that are intended consequences of the formal education offered by an academic unit" (p. 102). In general, the term is used in these standards to mean either an academic course or a readily identifiable portion of an academic course. Informal curriculum activities are not formally addressed in the standards. Thus, although the goal of inclusion of

gender issues is clearly identified as important, few guidelines or creative methods exist to help educators incorporate these issues into counselor preparation programs.

As gender issues do not appear to be in the process of becoming readily integrated into formal training curriculums, informal curriculum is a possible means by which to incorporate gender-related issues. Bailey (1993) noted the importance of designing formal and informal training curriculum informed by gender, suggesting three ways in which curricula could be changed to reflect a gendered model of educational practice: reconstruction, incrementalism, and transformation. The research cited above makes it clear that counselor education has not yet achieved a reconstructive model, in that traditional curricula have not yet integrated gender issues throughout counselor training. Adding women's studies as a discrete area, the incremental approach, has been similarly limited in effectiveness. Transformation requires an examination of all elements of the curriculum, including the informal curriculum, with consideration given to alternative learning styles based in gender socialization as well as diverse life experiences.

The aforementioned lack of specificity regarding how gender issues should be included in counselor training leaves room for the inclusion of cocurricular activities in partially meeting the CACREP standards. Cocurricular activities can facilitate students' awareness of gender issues in an "experiential" manner as designated in CACREP's (2001, p. 61) social and cultural diversity standards. Such activities have the additional benefits of facilitating professionalism, personal growth, an ability to advocate for client populations, and an ability to work together in groups--additional CACREP training standards.

PLANNING, IMPLEMENTATION, AND EVALUATION OF THE EVENT

A model designed to address gender issues in the training of counselors must be both comprehensive and contextual (Hoffman & Myers, 1996; Worrell & Remer, 1992). Although the Women's History Month Event was not designed as a transformative or contextual model, evaluations and modifications over the past 9 years have resulted in a program that has significant benefits for students through an informal curricular experience that supplements our infusion approach for training in gender issues. The strengths of the program are most evident in relation to the process by which the event is planned and implemented. This process is reviewed briefly, and the benefits to faculty, students, and the program are explored. An overview of the final product provides a context for this discussion.

The Event: An Overview of the Final Product

The Women's History Month Event is a 90-minute program that includes a panel of diverse women from the community primarily external to the counselor education program. Each of them speaks for 15 to 20 minutes on her personal experiences relating to the topic or theme of the program. Up to half of the time period is devoted to questions from the audience and responses from the panel. After the panel, the audience, including all departmental faculty, a majority of enrolled students, both male and female, and members of the community who choose to attend, adjourns to a community lunch that is provided by the department and designed to promote informal dialogue among the speakers and program attendees.

The Process

The process of planning the Women's History Month Event begins each fall, when female program faculty advertise a brown-bag lunch meeting to discuss possible themes. The themes are

selected by the students on the basis of their experiences, interests, readings, and research. The faculty encourage integration of feminist and counseling literature, as discussed below, as an integral part of theme selection. At the conclusion of the meeting, volunteers sign up for committees to plan the event. The Program Committee and the Event Planning Committees subsequently meet with half of the female faculty, with the full group meeting together monthly for 3 months prior to the event to share information and coordinate the planning process. The mission of the Program Committee is to define the theme and select and communicate with the panel. During the initial brown-bag lunch, faculty provide a historical overview of the event, and students who have participated in past years share their observations and experiences. Participants brainstorm the kinds of issues and speakers whom they would like to hear in order to expand their understanding of the unique life experiences of women. Speakers will be asked to talk about their personal lives and decisions, not their professional work, and are not required to be counseling professionals or representative of a particular client population. Potential speakers should be articulate women with both unique and common life and work experiences who are willing to share their decisions in relation to the topic and to discuss how the experience of being a woman has affected these decisions.

Each panelist will speak for 15 to 20 minutes, describing her personal experiences and decisions as well as how being a woman has affected those decisions. The Program Committee also develops a script for the event, which includes the introduction of the university, department administrators who welcome those present, and introductions of the speakers. Faculty members review the script and recommend changes to enhance professionalism, focus comments on the topic, and ensure uniformity in the length of introductions. Members of the Program Committee emcee the event, introduce the speakers, moderate the panel discussion, and send thank-you letters to the speakers.

Event Planning Committees

Other committees are organized around the various tasks associated with promoting and implementing such an event. These committees typically include publicity, facilities, luncheon, and historical record (i.e., video and photographs). Each committee has a volunteer chair who coordinates meetings, depending on the designated committee tasks; creates a timeline for the committee's work; and makes sure all tasks are covered.

The Publicity Committee sends details of the event to the universitywide committee, which designs a large poster flyer listing campuswide Women's History Month Events. This committee sends the flyer to a large distribution list (e.g., university alumni) and sends information to the local media. A news reporter has attended three of the events; an article and photos have appeared in the city newspaper each time. The Publicity Committee also creates and distributes flyers within the department and to internship hosts and posts flyers across campus.

The Facilities Committee reserves a room for the event, makes necessary arrangements, and then does setup and cleanup, including decorations. This committee also arranges on-campus parking permits for the speakers. The Luncheon Committee orders deli trays and solicits food donations (e.g., chips, drinks, desserts) from students and sets up an attractive buffet table. The Historical Record Committee videotapes the event for uses such as class instruction and advertising for subsequent events. In addition, pictures are taken for posting on bulletin boards and to accompany newsletter articles and PowerPoint presentations showcasing departmental activities. These committees provide the necessary behind-the-scenes work to make the event run smoothly

so that the audience can comfortably focus on the program and the panel members can feel like honored guests.

A female faculty member who works with these committees reviews plans and flyers and provides prompts or encouragement as needed. Monthly meetings at which all committees report help maintain enthusiasm and momentum for the planning process.

THE EVENT PROGRAM

Once the theme is decided for a given year, the Program Committee explores the theme and generates a list of possible speakers who, based on their personal knowledge and experience, seem to be individuals who can address the topic. At the same time, a list of questions for each speaker to address is developed. These questions are designed to elicit personal content and are based on knowledge of feminist theory and research. Selected readings that provide background information related to the theme are incorporated into one or more of the class requirements for students who will attend the event, which includes but is not limited to students in the developmental and multicultural counseling courses.

By agreement, each year the panel includes an ethnically and culturally diverse group of women. After the list of possible speakers is prioritized, members of the committee contact the women to invite their participation. Seldom has any woman declined for any reason except a scheduling conflict.

The topics of the Women's History Month Event and description of the panel members for the past 9 years are shown in Appendix A; Appendix B includes sample questions for the panelists to consider. The manner in which the selection of topics and panelists is grounded in the literature is reflected in the following brief review of relevant literature for one of the topics chosen.

The event "As We Are Now: Reflections on a Lifetime of Choices" was designed to help younger women learn about the experiences of women across the life span by highlighting the lives of women in later adulthood. The panelists ranged in age from 70 to 99 years and included a retired school teacher, a retired academic dean, a retired community theater actress, and a retired counselor educator/department chair. Panel members were asked to reflect on their experiences as women across the life span. Their comments revealed how perceptions and attitudes toward women had changed in their lifetime, including the achievement of basic rights such as the right to vote, hold office, and work in managerial positions. Each woman told the story of her unique life, yet all shared common experiences relating to being female.

Older persons commonly tell stories about their lives as part of an intentional and normative developmental process (Myers & Schwiebert, 1996). In fact, storytelling, or narrative, is essential to the attainment of what Erikson (1963) called ego integrity, a sense that one's life has been lived well. Further, narrative is essential to making meaning over the life span (Randall, 1999). Bluck (2001) studied memory narratives in older and younger persons and concluded that autobiographical memory remains intact in later life. She further noted the importance of narrative gerontology as an avenue to learn about the lives of older persons.

The panel of older women promoted the link between discourse and life identity discussed by Coupland and Nussbaum (1993), demonstrating the process through which change in daily interactions and social contexts constitutes the dynamic process of life-span development. The panel also brought to life the findings related to creative aging uncovered by Helson (1999) in

the Mills Longitudinal Study. The women in Helson's research actualized their creative potential through relationships rather than careers, factors clearly evident in the life stories of each of the event panelists. Finally, Helson suggested the importance of rewriting one's life script as a part of successful aging. Each of the older female panelists exemplified the outcomes of this narrative process through her life stories.

Students who read research by Helson (1999) and others prior to the event panel, as well as those who studied only the works of developmental theorists such as Erikson, were able to relate their readings to the real-life experiences of the panelists. Given the importance of qualitative designs, such as narrative, in the study of gendered experience, the ability of participants to experience personal stories in the context of theory contributed to more meaningful discussions of theory in subsequent developmental classes during the semester. Similarly, given the ethnic and cultural diversity of the panel members, cultural differences demonstrated in personal narratives became the subject of subsequent class discussions in the multicultural class linking theory with practice and real human experience.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The implications for a program of this type are many. The program planning and implementation are part of and consistent with larger efforts by the department to promote professionalism and professional involvement, including active student associations (leadership development, committees, and events). This also dovetails with various course requirements to attend conferences, as well as strong encouragement to be involved in organizations and in advocacy activities (e.g., Borders & Benshoff, 1992).

Students often volunteer for tasks that allow them to use their existing skills and interests (e.g., making computer-generated flyers, designing attractive buffet table displays) as well as for tasks that require them to learn new skills. In this way, the work seems less like work and more like fun. A number of students have volunteered for several different committees across the years; some have begun with behind-the-scenes tasks and moved on to more "upfront" positions (e.g., emcee). Any student can be involved, at whatever level she or he feels comfortable. These experiences not only help students understand the complexities of putting on any such event (or conference) but also let them see that it all can be accomplished through the efforts of volunteers working in positions they choose--and thus enjoy.

In a counseling program that includes both master's-level and doctoral-level students, an event such as this provides an opportunity for both to work together. It also provides a chance for students from various cohorts and various program tracks to work together. Master 's-level and doctoral-level students are both provided a forum in which to take a lead for a particular committee. The luncheon, in particular, helps this become a community event for students, for faculty, and for the larger community by promoting the sharing of experiences at an informal level.

For students learning about and being exposed to issues of diversity and various worldviews, the Women's History Month Event is a chance for them to see the power and impact of a person telling her story. The audience, including students, has the opportunity to hear the layers of a woman's experience--the struggles behind the success, the determination to reach a goal, and the difficulty of making decisions that affect others. Audience members are able to see the heroine

qualities in women who are remarkable for their life story, although not necessarily famous or even well-known.

APPENDIX A
Women's History Month Events: Topics and Presenters

Topic/Title	Panel Members
As We Are Now: Reflections on a Lifetime of Choices	Retired teacher Retired dean, historically Black college Retired community actress Retired counselor educator
Women as Agents of Change	Mayor Immigration attorney Chair, commission on status of women
Motherhood: If, When, and How	Counselor education professor City manager Private practitioner, counseling
Motherhood: Achieving Wellness Without It	Professor, human development Professor, curriculum and instruction Private practitioner and author
Women and Wellness: Empowering Self and Others	Professor, exercise and sports science Hospice director Hospital chaplain
Women Breaking Barriers and Building Bridges	CEO of multiple auto dealerships NASA engineer, mother Dean, private Ivy League university
Women's Spirituality Over the Life Span	Chair, Jewish family services Director, county Native American council Spiritual director
Finding Our Voices: Women Speaking Out for Change	Professor and director of teachers academy Director, women's resource center Politician, lobbyist
Women in Multiple Roles: Working Toward Balance	Counselor and consultant, private practice Instructor, school of business Stay-at-home mother, community volunteer

This event is also an opportunity to see women as role models, women from whom to learn ways to solve problems, surmount difficulties, deal with challenges, and handle a variety of situations. This modeling further extends to the numerous ways that women can have an impact, create meaning in their lives, and live quiet or not-so-quiet lives of substance.

The program presented here is easily adapted to various types of counseling programs. Counseling programs that have multiple program components, or a single component such as school counseling, as well as both full-time and part-time programs can garner the benefits of professional development, community, and modeling that are evident in this event. A part-time program might focus on a Saturday or late evening event. This would be a chance not only to involve students in a learning process revolving around setting up such as event but also to create community and collaboration among students who may rarely interact.

The event is also easily replicated with other populations. For example, the program could focus on men in traditionally female occupations who have overcome bias and stereotypes to forge inroads for others: The focus then becomes gender issues in the broader sense. The program could also be replicated to focus on minority populations of color. For example, if the focus was to be Latinos, the counseling students, under the mentoring of faculty members, would meet and, with input from the local Latino community, come up with a topic, identify questions and potential panelists, and design appropriate luncheon facilities and decor.

The power of the informal curriculum is such that what cannot be achieved through course work can be accomplished through the planning and implementation of events such as the Women's History Month Event. Such an event allows counselor educators ways to integrate content so as

to include all counseling students and methods for providing meaningful and relevant learning experiences. Events such as this provide experiential ways to increase awareness of gender-related issues. These activities also facilitate professionalism and advocacy, create community and collaboration, and promote professional involvement and leadership development.

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Women as Agents of Change	Mayor Immigration attorney Chair, commission on status of women
Motherhood: If, When, and How	Counselor education professor City manager Private practitioner, counseling
Motherhood: Achieving Wellness Without It	Professor, human development Professor, curriculum and instruction Private practitioner and author
Women and Wellness: Empowering Self and Others	Professor, exercise and sports science Hospice director Hospital chaplain
Women Breaking Barriers and Building Bridges	CEO of multiple auto dealerships NASA engineer, mother Dean, private Ivy League university
Women's Spirituality Over the Life Span	Chair, Jewish family services Director, county Native

American council
Spiritual director

Finding Our Voices: Women Speaking
Out for Change

Professor and director of
teachers academy
Director, women's resource
center
Politician, lobbyist

Women in Multiple Roles: Working
Toward Balance

Counselor and consultant,
private practice
Instructor, school of
business
Stay-at-home mother,
community volunteer

APPENDIX B

Sample Questions for Event Panelists

What were the circumstances surrounding your decision to take a stand and advocate for what you believe in?

In what ways did being a woman influence your decisions?

What obstacles did you encounter when you tried to enact change?

What have been the costs and benefits to you personally?

How did your decisions affect your family?

How did your decisions affect your career?

Who were your heroines or heroes when you were a teenager?

What are your biggest struggles now and how do you work to overcome them?

What recommendations do you have for women in today's world?

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