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CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION: LINKING EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

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ABSTRACT

Recent growth in community-based services for developmentally disabled persons has highlighted the need for innovative strategies to attract staff to this field.

This article will describe how the Young Adult Institute has linked education and employment for students interested in pursuing a recreational career.

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OVERVIEW OF THE YOUNG ADULT INSTITUTE

One of the challenges facing the Young Adult Institute, a major social service agency serving the needs of developmentally disabled* adults, is to attract and prepare professionals interested in recreation services to apply their skills in this expanding and dynamic field. To facilitate this goal, the agency's Resource Management Department initiated an innovative concept of Co-operative Education. This serves to link the needs of students to prepare themselves for careers in recreation with the agency's growing need for staff.

The Young Adult Institute is a non-profit, non-sectarian agency which has been providing quality services to developmentally disabled persons throughout New York City and Westchester County. As pioneers in the advocacy, development and implementation of community-based services

since 1957, the Young Adult Institute provides a full range of training, recreational, residential and family support programs. Underlying these programs is a commitment and philosophy to assist individuals to enhance their abilities and to take on a more productive, self-sufficient and integrated role in society.

Recognizing the need for new services, the agency has grown every year to meet this challenge with trend-setting programs. Today, the Young Adult Institute assists more than 1200 individuals and their families on a daily basis through forty (40) programs at more than twenty-five (25) sites.

As programs have expanded, so too has the number of staff, to over eight hundred (800) full-time and part-time employees. All of the programs utilize recreation programming as a means of helping individuals to maximize their personal development and basic skills. The need is therefore great to reach out and prepare individuals who have an interest in developing and implementing recreation services for these special programs.

As an innovative method to attract a large source of potential staff members, the agency looked at how it could also provide an important service for students undergoing Undergraduate and Graduate training in recreation in colleges and universities (2).

THE COOPERATIVE EDUCATION CONCEPT

Young Adult Institute began its internship/cooperative education program for University students with several goals in mind: 1) The internship program would serve to augment the agency's mission of increasing the general population's awareness of developmentally disabled persons and enhance community acceptance via dissolution of myths and fears. 2) Students would be able to increase one-to-one contacts for clients and to implement specialized programming such as in the areas of recreation and leisure. Students would also provide an outside perspective, a fresh way of viewing a program and stimulate new thoughts by their questions and observations. 3) A pool of experienced persons would be created for purposes of staff recruitment. These persons would have proven themselves in terms of having performed well in an internship experience by relating well to staff and clients, demonstrating an ability to learn and grow, showing motivation and other characteristics looked for in staff.

The internship program was developed to meet the above stated goals. Majors were identified that would appear matched to program needs and recruitment goals. Included in these majors were: Therapeutic Recreation, Recreation Education, Social Work, Psychology, Human Service, Special Education, Speech, Nursing, Health Education and Administration. Emphasis was placed initially on the undergraduate level person as the bulk of annual staff openings were for persons enrolled in or having completed B.A. programs. As the program grew from 40 students in 1980-81 to 220 students in 1984-85, emphasis was placed on increasing the number

of graduate students and on training students to eventually fill specific staff positions.

To increase the recreation student's interest in training with the Young Adult Institute it was recognized that many students may need to obtain a paid position which would provide them with the financial support they require to continue to pursue their education. In order to meet that need, while at the same time filling the growing need for responsible staff members, the concept of Co-operative Education was developed. A Co-operative Education position is one in which a student would take on an existing, paid, full or part-time position in the agency, while at the same time receiving the professional supervision and experience needed to fulfill the college field work or internship requirements towards their recreation degree. An objective of this program is to retain the cooperative students after internship requirements are fulfilled.

Young Adult Institute's relationship with universities has been mutually beneficial for students, the Young Adult Institute and the universities involved. University students have been offered employment, received university authorized supervision, and attended Young Adult Institute's conferences, lecture series and inservice training seminars. Professors and department chairpersons have presented at Young Adult Institute's conferences and have also served on various panels and committees. Young Adult Institute's staff have had the opportunity to take courses at reduced or no cost at a number of universities, serve on college advisory committees, plan curriculum, teach classes, participate in field and career day fairs and lecture to special interest clubs. Programming has been enriched as students have shared special skills and talents.

Starting an internship/cooperative education program demands that time and energy be allocated to that process and that the organization be committed to carrying through with needed follow-up and supports. The field of recreation was identified by Young Adult Institute as an area for which time and necessary supports would be provided.

RANGE OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECREATION SPECIALISTS

In a multifaceted agency such as the Young Adult Institute, recreational services are delivered in various ways in a variety of settings. This diversity allows for an array of experiences for student co-operative placements. Thus, variety, decision-making and striving for greater independence are at the root of the experience for both client and student. We must provide people with the ability to choose from the spectrum of learning opportunities in order to maximize their potential (1, 3).

At the residences of the Young Adult Institute, recreation plays an important part in the utilization of free time and the development of life-long leisure skills. Recreation occurs after work hours and on the weekends. Activities are based both in the residence and in the

community, and include trips to parks, museums, performances and sporting events.

In the Young Adult Institute's day treatment programs, recreation serves as one of the core service areas. Activities are integrated into the client's treatment plan and attended daily. The focus of recreation is not only the promotion of constructive use of leisure time but it can also serve as a modality to reinforce other areas of treatment.

The programs in the Department of Family and Support Services utilize recreation in many different ways. The Evening and Alumni Programs use recreation as a modality to teach independence and socialization. These programs base the majority of their recreational activities in the community where integration can be stressed (4). In the respite service network, recreational activities may be part of an in-home respite visit, and the respite drop-off centers provide a variety of recreational activities for its participants.

The most important variable in the recreation service delivered in each of the above settings is enjoyment. As with the normal population, developmentally disabled people recreate firstly to enjoy themselves. Recreation inherently provides opportunity for growth in many areas including self-esteem, physical well-being and social interaction.

Students can share in this growth in a wide variety of settings through co-operative experiences. The wide array of programs and activities expose students to all areas of recreational and leisure programming both in programs and in the community.

SUMMARY

Co-operative Education has been a successful alliance between the Young Adult Institute, as an employer and trainer, and college departments of recreation. By linking recreation students' fieldwork with existing paid staff positions, Co-operative Education furthers the mutual goal of preparing students for careers in this field in a variety of ways. It benefits the employer by helping to attract motivated students to fill existing staff needs, while assisting students and colleges by providing a training site and an opportunity for students to finance their educational pursuits.

*Developmental disability: a disability associated with mental retardation, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, or another neurological condition of an individual that is closely related to mental retardation or requires similar treatment and that originates in early childhood, is likely to continue, and constitutes a substantial handicap to the individual.

Classification in Mental Retardation American Association of Mental Deficiency 1983, Washington, DC.

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