# Serving the Community and Training Students: Challenges and Lessons from a University-Sponsored Human Service Agency

John Poulin, Paula Silver and Stephen Kauffman

## Abstract

*This paper describes the process of developing and sustaining a human service agency sponsored by Widener University aimed at providing enriched internship opportunities for students in University-based professional programs while at the same time addressing the pressing needs of under-resourced communities. Student learning outcomes, challenges and lessons learned are discussed. The findings may be useful in establishing professional internship programs that fully engage students in addressing the needs of local distressed communities.*

This paper presents the evaluation findings of an innovative approach to meeting the social work practice training needs of masters' level social work students through the creation of a Widener University-sponsored field placement agency that we named Social Work Consultation Services (SWCS). Social Work Consultation Services was developed collaboratively by Widener University's Center for Social Work Education and a local community agency, the Chester Education Foundation. We begin with a discussion of the history of the development of SWCS, its purpose, and some of the challenges encountered. We then go on to review the process and outcome evaluation findings regarding the degree to which the agency has met student training and community service goals.

The creation of Social Work Consultation Services (SWCS), a student field placement agency, was motivated by the strong interest of our social work faculty to address the human service needs of the University's local community, Chester, Pennsylvania, an under-resourced and socio-economically disadvantaged community. Another motivating factor was the on-going challenge the social work program experienced in identifying appropriate field internship sites for our students.

# Identifying Mutual Interests

## The Local Community

By any objective measure, Chester, Pennsylvania (population 36,854) is facing extraordinary challenges (U.S. Bureau of the Census n.d.a). Strongly affected by the

economic changes of the post-World War II era, the city lost 32 percent of its jobs between the 1950s and the 1980s. During those years, the city's economic base collapsed, the tax base narrowed and much of the middle class moved out. These economic changes were coupled with a period of "organized" political corruption that only ended when the State interceded in the1980s.

These economic changes created a variety of related socio-economic problems, such as high rates of unemployment, dependence on income maintenance, and high rates of crime and substance abuse use. The city also lost a large number of residents. Since 1980 alone, the population decreased by 19.4 percent from its 1980 population (U.S. Bureau of the Census n.d.b).

The 2000 Census classified 1,860 families (22.8%) and 9,249 persons (27.2%) in Chester as living in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census n.d.b). In terms of unemployment, according to the 2000 Census, 41% of Chester's adults are outside of the labor force, with an unemployment rate of 9.9% (U.S. Bureau of the Census n.d.b). These numbers are among the highest in the State and have consistently been so from the late 1970s to now. These statistics do not reflect the large number of adults who have given up and dropped out of the labor force. The city's schools have also experienced decline and ongoing difficulties: an increase in dropout rates, a decrease in post-high school education plans, and standardized test results that are significantly below State averages. The school district has been taken over by the State. Compounding these social problems, quality social service provision in the community had been negatively affected by problems of infrastructure. In one recent study (Kauffman and Goldberg-Glenn 1998), over half (51%) of the respondents to a survey indicated that waiting lists created difficulties for those who seek services. Transportation (37%), service worker attitudes (37%), and awareness of services (38%) also were seen as significant barriers to service. In addition, social service agencies in the community are generally under-resourced in terms of staff and money.

## Serving the Local Community

Given the extensive needs of the local community, the involvement of the University's human capital in supporting local revitalization was critical. In addition, the learning opportunities for faculty and students were potentially enormous. Early in the development of the Center's Master's of Social Work (MSW) program, the faculty had envisioned extending the professional resources of the Center to meet the pressing needs of the local community through faculty service and student internships. Social work faculty members, individually, did become very involved in community service activities. One of the ongoing challenges the program faced in having students become involved through field internships was the limited human service infrastructure of this city. Accreditation standards require social work students to be under the supervision of experienced professional social workers or have the Center arrange for supplementary supervision from faculty, at the program's expense (Council on Social Work Education 2003). This tended to drastically limit the program's ability to utilize local community agencies as placement sites.

Influenced by new educational models of civic engagement, the faculty began to think about how the Center might overcome the barriers to involving students in local community revitalization efforts. The faculty believed that widening the focus of field internship beyond that of professional skills training in established social service-organizations to include the idea of field internship as an opportunity for service learning and community engagement would be an innovative approach to the problem. Building the local community's capacity to meet the human service needs of its residents while at the same time training our students was seen as a potentially rewarding project for both students and the community. Such an approach would have the added benefit of preparing graduates with the relevant skills, experience and commitment for working in disadvantaged communities. In order to do so, however, we would have to solve the problem of providing appropriate and adequate field instructors.

## Disappearing Placement Opportunities

In addition to the faculty's interest in addressing the unmet needs of our local community and extending the focus of field internship, there was the growing challenge of providing adequate field internship experiences both for undergraduate and graduate social work students. Clinical internship has long been a central component of social work education. However, over the last fifteen years, changes in the funding and management structures for almost all human services have severely compromised the availability of adequate field internship opportunities at all levels of social work education. The spread of managed care, perhaps the most dramatic change of all, has rendered protected caseloads and dedicated field instruction for social work interns increasingly difficult to secure (Knight 2001; Kissman and Tran 1990; Fortune and Abramson 1993; Fortune, Feathers, and Rook 1985). Social service funding reductions and staff turnover exacerbate the problem, and each year field instruction programs face shrinking numbers of viable placement sites and qualified supervisors.

Making the situation even worse, available field internship sites are rarely able to provide students with the range of activities needed to support Bachelor's of Social Work (BSW) and Master's of Social Work (MSW) foundation level generalist training requirements (Koerin, Reeves, and Rosenblum 2000; Rabin, Savaya, and Frank 1994). Most human service agencies tend to provide direct services to targeted client populations. A much smaller number of agencies engage in planning and/or community development, and an even smaller number are devoted to policy analysis and development. Almost none combine micro and macro practice functions and, consequently, are hard-pressed to provide interns with appropriate generalist practice experiences (Alperin 1995; Alperin 1998).

In response to these concerns, some schools of social work have developed alternative or non-traditional field opportunities. At one end of the spectrum are schools that have attempted to enhance practicum experiences through the modification of course assignments (Wolk 1994), neighborhood network development (Morrison et al. 1997), or simulations of community-based practice using data from actual university-agency collaborations (Lowe 1996). Others have developed partnerships with existing

agencies, such as the management training opportunities provided by Boston University's collaboration with a consortium of settlement houses in Massachusetts (Mulroy and Cragin 1994). A few schools have even developed their own agencies as a way of creating optimal field placement options, such as the University of Tel Aviv (Rabin, Savaya, and Frank 1994) and the University of Maryland–Baltimore.

## Launching Social Work Consultation Services

Thus, out of the faculty's interest in serving the local community, integrating the social work model of professional skills training through field internship with civic engagement models of service learning, as well as solving the problem of providing students with adequate field internship opportunities in the widening managed care environment, the concept of a University-sponsored field internship agency emerged. Social Work Consultation Services (SWCS) was conceived as a field placement site that would develop partnerships with local grassroots community organizations. While students would be placed at SWCS and receive supervision from qualified SWCS staff, they would be assigned to local partner agencies where they would provide social work services to the partner agency's clients.

## Getting Organized

A faculty committee was established to get input from community stakeholders regarding how such a program might best serve the community. Through focus groups with key informants and community stakeholders, the committee learned several important lessons. First, in order for such an initiative to gain community "buy in," the program would have to involve community stakeholders as partners rather than "subjects" of academic study or student learning. Secondly, in order to gain credibility, the Center for Social Work Education and the University would have to make a long-term commitment to the project. Thirdly, in order to be effective, the Center would have to take the time to learn about the uniqueness of the community, its history, its residents, established networks and relationships, and the dynamics of the community's perception of the University as a neighbor. Finally, success of the initiative would be more likely if the Center were to partner with existing community networks.

## Finding a Primary Partner

Faculty studied existing community organizations looking for a partner that had credibility in the community, organizational stability, a strong funding history and commitment to the concept of partnering for community development. After meeting with several community organizations, an ideal partner, Chester Education Foundation (CEF), was found. The mission of CEF, a private, non-profit organization, was to support educational excellence and promote community revitalization in the local school district's community. Incorporated in 1989, CEF's successful record of program funding, community credibility and organizational stability met all of the criteria the faculty had established for a partner agency.

## Funding Efforts

It was clear to the faculty in the beginning that funding for the project would have to be secured from sources external to the University. The University's administration at the time was generally unsupportive of community-directed initiatives by academic units. This would change dramatically with the appointment of a new president, James T. Harris, in 2003. However, in 2000, if SWCS were to become a reality its fiscal foundation would have to be independent of the University. In collaboration with CEF, the faculty set out to secure grants to launch the program in September 2000. The partnership with a non-profit organization allowed the faculty to compete for foundation funds earmarked for academic programs, as well as those earmarked for non-profit organizations.

By mid-summer 2000, sufficient funding had been secured to operate the program for at least ten months. To save on costs, CEF agreed to allow the program to share its office space and administrative resources. Even though the program was not 100 percent funded, it was decided to proceed with the planned fall semester opening with the hope that additional funding would be secured as the year progressed. Had the faculty been more fiscally cautious and less optimistic, the program would probably never have been inaugurated, but convinced of the appeal and importance of the project, the faculty decided to throw caution to the wind and open up for business as planned. Thus, SWCS officially began in September 2000 with a full-time program director, a part-time field instructor, three one-quarter time faculty members and ten MSW student interns.

## Designing the Program

Social Work Consultation Services (SWCS) articulated a dual mission—to maximize the students' learning opportunities and to fill service gaps in the community while expanding the capacity of the human service infrastructure. The program design called for student interns to provide a range of direct social work services for local residents and families including supportive counseling, psychoeducational groups, client advocacy, resource mobilization, and case management. SWCS professional staff and faculty would provide field instruction for all direct services provided.

In addition, SWCS was committed to helping build the human service infrastructure of the community. Toward that end, SWCS would seek to collaborate with local agencies to provide agreed upon capacity building supports. The partner relationships would be fully collaborative with the agency and SWCS in jointly identifying and designing the capacity building projects. Faculty-led student teams would be organized to carry out projects. Projects might include program development and evaluation; needs assessments; grant application preparation; community outreach and strategic planning; community education, training, and development; and collaborative initiatives.

# Making It Happen

## Community Outreach and Building Partnerships

As an unknown entity in the community, SWCS had to spend considerable time engaged in community outreach. This was done in a variety of ways including the creation of a Web site, brochure, publicity press kit, and newsletters; seeking media coverage through the newspaper; attendance at community meetings; and word of mouth.

During the first year (2000-2001), SWCS articulated agreements with five local agencies for direct service and capacity building projects. That number has now grown to nineteen and includes agencies such as local charter and public schools, the local public housing authority, senior residences and services, day care centers, wellness centers, county probation and child protection agencies, community planning coalitions, domestic abuse programs, and HIV/AIDS programs.

## Direct Services

SWCS has been able to achieve its goal of providing an array of direct social work services that would otherwise have been unavailable to individuals, families, and small groups in the local community. SWCS's clients are both self-referred and referred by local agencies. Part of SWCS's success in serving clients directly has been the flexibility to see clients wherever it best suited the client—at home, at the local agency or on-site at the SWCS offices. All SWCS social work services are provided free of charge to the consumers. Since the fall of 2000 SWCS has provided social work services to over 2,000 community residents.

## Capacity Building Services

Faculty/student teams have undertaken a number of capacity building projects with our partner agencies during the first three years of operation. All projects listed below were completed by teams of three or four SWCS students under the supervision of a Center faculty member or SWCS staff member. Eight of the projects were staff development trainings or workshops, seven were service program or organizational projects, six were event-planning projects, four were research projects and one was a calendar project. Table 2 lists capacity building projects completed to date by type of project.

| Table 1. Capacity Building Projects by Type | |
|---|---|
| **Type of Project** | **Project** |
| *Staff Development Training/Workshops* | • 4 workshops on child development and behavior management<br>• Training on case documentation<br>• Training on interviewing<br>• 4 workshops on interviewing and relationship building<br>• Management workshop on diversity<br>• Training on mental illness and substance abuse<br>• Case management training<br>• 3 educational workshops on responding to trauma for residential staff |
| *Organizational Development* | • Develop outreach plan<br>• Develop sustainability plan<br>• Design mentoring program<br>• Design case management system<br>• Developed client incentive program<br>• Developed youth advisory board<br>• Develop record system |
| *Event Planning* | • Organized a consumer and professional conference on welfare reform<br>• Organized Community Service Day – October 2001, 2002, 2003<br>• Organized a Take Back the Night Event – April 2001, 2002, 2003 |
| *Research/Evaluation/ Grant Writing* | • Conduct a client survey<br>• Conducted risk and resource assessment<br>• Conducted a process evaluation<br>• Develop risk assessment instrument<br>• Assisted in preparing grant application |
| *Other* | • Produced a community calendar |

# Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned

This section presents the findings of an ongoing process evaluation of the implementation of the SWCS program that identifies a number of challenges faced and lessons learned over the first six years of the program's implementation. Challenges related to governance, educational component, funding, collaboration, service delivery, organizational culture, internal tensions and partnerships are reviewed and discussed.

## Governance Challenges

SWCS is a collaborative program with a collaborative leadership style. Although SWCS has a defined hierarchical organizational structure, shared governance and empowerment are its governing principles. While the main decision-making body is the Executive Committee, the goal is to have a transparent decision-making process and to have all members of SWCS fully informed about all program developments, new initiatives and the operations of the program. Often the Executive Committee brings ideas and proposals to the entire staff for discussion and decision-making.

SWCS is also committed to empowering the staff and students. All staff and students are encouraged to become involved in the development and operation of the program. Students rotate chairing the monthly staff meeting and they are encouraged to help develop and/or revise policies and procedures. For example, students identified a need for clearly articulated procedures regarding safety. They enlisted the help of a faculty member to assist them in developing written policy guidelines and procedures. Recommendations were submitted to the Executive Committee and to the entire staff for approval.

**Lessons Learned** During the first year of operation, the leadership structure was somewhat ambiguously defined and there was an attempt to do everything by consensus. This arrangement failed to recognize the inherent power and authority differentials between faculty and students and between MSW staff and students. Students were uncomfortable with the lack of a defined power hierarchy and with the consensus approach. They felt that the faculty and staff were the more experienced "experts" and that what they needed was direction and supervision. They also felt that, in reality, the program director and faculty had the power and authority to make decisions and to provide leadership to the program. Pretending any different was misleading to them. During the second year, the administrative structure was formalized and the roles and duties of the faculty and staff were clearly defined. Staff and student empowerment is achieved through the implementation of the program and its services. Students and staff are given a great deal of latitude in identifying service and organizational needs and in developing creative solutions.

## Educational Challenges

The educational component of SWCS has been an ongoing process of change. During the first year of operation, four of the foundation MSW courses were taught on site, exclusively for SWCS students. These courses included the foundation practice sequence (two courses), the macro practice course (communities and organizations), and the introductory research methods courses. All of the courses were integrated into the students' field placement experiences. The classes were held during field placement and most of the assignments were tied to actual projects being conducted at SWCS.

**Lessons Learned** While the SWCS-based courses were well received by the students and the students clearly saw the connections between micro practice, macro practice and research in the development and delivery of services, having three faculty members

teach four courses to six students was not cost effective. In an attempt to make the educational component of SWCS more cost effective, SWCS-based sections were eliminated and SWCS students now take all coursework in regular classes on campus.

Integrating the course work into the students' field placement was one of the factors that excited the Center's faculty as the concept of SWCS was being developed. The experience for the students was very positive. They loved the individual attention, small class sizes, having classes during field placement hours and the integration of the assignments into their field placement assignments. On the other hand, the SWCS-based sections tended to isolate the SWCS interns from classmates involved in more traditional field internships and to reduce the likelihood of SWCS' interns being able to share their learning experiences with other students or to benefit from those of their classmates.

## Funding Challenges

As already stated, SWCS is primarily grant and contract funded. The University provides in-kind support through faculty release time, some direct support through faculty overloads and student stipends, and in 2003, the University began funding office space rental and furnishings. The Chester Education Foundation provides in-kind logistical and administrative support. The bulk of the funding, however, is provided by grants secured by the SWCS program and through service contracts with state, county and municipal human service agencies.

Initially, almost 100 percent of SWCS' funding was from foundation grants. Since such funding is inherently precarious, the strategy has been to reduce the percentage of funds obtained from grants and to increase the proportion of the budget derived from more stable service contracts. During the third budget year about 70 percent of funding was from contracts and about 30 percent from foundation grants. The goal is to have between 80 and 90 percent of the annual budget derived from service and consulting contracts. The vision is to have the service and consulting contracts with more established organizations help to subsidize development of innovative service programs and capacity building projects with under-funded community-based human service organizations.

**Lessons Learned** Fund development is the greatest challenge facing a program such as SWCS. Social Work Consultation Services was created to help fill social work service gaps in a disadvantaged community and to provide capacity building to under-funded community human service organizations. We have been successful in developing a number of new programs and services that are offered free of charge to community residents. However, as the program becomes institutionalized and as the program structure becomes more complex, the required fiscal base increases.

Grant funding allows for more freedom in program development and service provision. The grantee defines the need and proposes a solution. This type of funding allows SWCS to be very responsive to community needs and developing innovative programs

to meet the identified needs. However, charitable foundations generally do not want grantees to remain dependent upon their funds for long-term support and require grantees to pursue strategies for fiscal sustainability. SWCS has done so by developing service and consulting contracts which has, in turn, diminished our ability to respond to service gaps in the community and to provide capacity building services to local human service organizations. More and more, the services offered by SWCS are determined by our funding contracts and our resources are taken up fulfilling our contractual obligations. The need to survive as an organization and the ongoing challenge of fund development has fostered a funding strategy that has, in part, moved the organization away from its original mission. This shift is a classic example of goal displacement.

## Collaboration Challenges

Implementing a collaborative program is often a challenge. Turf issues, coordination problems and communication breakdowns are frequently the norm. Surprisingly, the collaboration between the Center and the Foundation has been almost problem-free. The budget is a collaborative effort. All decisions about the grantee (the Center versus the Foundation) for contracts and grants are made jointly. The decisions are based upon the likelihood of success and on which organization (the Center or the Foundation) best fits the requirements of the funding source.

Social Work Consultation Services has staff and administrative personnel from both parent organizations and both organizations have a voice in the management of the program and in strategic planning. The CEOs of the parent organizations are actively involved in the project and committed to its success. The two CEOs and the SWCS administrators meet regularly to problem-solve, share information and plan fund development.

**Lessons Learned** The program has been a successful collaboration because of the attitude of the CEOs of the parent organizations. They have adopted an attitude of cooperation, have made a commitment to the partnership, and have consistently made the best interests of the program a priority. The formula for success has definitely been having the key leadership adopt an attitude of collaboration in both spirit and action.

The collaboration between the Center and the Foundation has resulted in some unanticipated benefits for both organizations. The Foundation has assisted the school in establishing close linkages with other community human service organizations and partnerships on other university/community service learning projects. The Foundation has also helped the school by providing guest speakers for graduate and undergraduate social work classes and in expanding the school's cadre of adjunct faculty.

The school has benefited the Foundation through providing faculty expertise for program development and assistance with other Foundation projects and tasks related to the internal management of the organization. Center faculty are on Foundation committees and have provided consultation on a number of research and evaluation projects. In addition, the Center has helped the Foundation make a stronger connection to the university and increase the university's involvement in the community.

## Service Delivery Challenges

Social Work Consultation Services was created, in part, to provide service-learning opportunities for students while at the same time filling community service gaps. One problem with creating a human service organization primarily staffed by students is that service recipients need services year round. Lack of continuity of service compromises the organization's credibility with other service providers and with clients. We very quickly realized that we would have to offer services during the summer. Consequently, we had to build into our budget summer employment for most, if not all, of our returning interns.

Another service delivery issue related to having an organization staffed primarily by student interns is that of staff turnover. Each year SWCS accepts between ten and fifteen undergraduate and graduate student interns. At the beginning of each new academic year we have a new cohort of interns. This means that each fall, SWCS is effectively a new organization with a new complement of participants. The whole process of developing an organizational culture, team building, and learning the system has to begin once more, and a significant amount of time is taken away from service delivery to train and socialize new students. The socialization and team building processes are especially important since SWCS integrates students in the organization's governance. We expect our students to be leaders and to help create new programs and services to meet their clients' needs. Creating this type of work culture takes time and having to start over again each fall is an ongoing challenge.

**Lessons Learned** One strategy to address both the socialization and continuity of service issues is to hire a greater complement of full-time staff. Our goal is to have at least one full time social worker/supervisor assigned to each service team. Currently, SWCS has one full-time and three part-time MSW supervisors. We hope to add full-time staff to the school and vulnerable adults teams in the coming years.

## Partnering for Capacity Building Challenges

During the past three years, SWCS has developed capacity building relationships with about nineteen community human service organizations most of which are under-funded and overworked. Unfortunately, the organizations with the greatest need are also those with which we have had the greatest difficulty developing collaborative relationships. Organizations that are struggling for their own survival and are in a crisis mode of operation are not ideal assignments for student interns seeking to develop the organization's capacity to serve it clients. The climate in the organizations experiencing crisis is not necessarily conducive to supporting student learning. The attention of the administrators and staff is on getting through the crisis and surviving. Under these conditions there is little energy or support for taking on student interns even if they bring much needed resources to the organization. During the past six years we had to terminate our relationship with two organizations that were experiencing severe problems affecting their survival as organizations.

**Lessons Learned** During our first year of operation, we agreed to collaborate with a

number of community agencies and decided that the specifics of the partnership would be worked out as we learned more about each organization's needs. The arrangement was an informal word of mouth agreement. The ambiguity created some confusion about expectations for our interns and their roles and responsibilities in their work with the partner agencies. After the first year most of the partner agencies requested a more formal memorandum of understanding (MOU). In response, we developed a detailed MOU for each partner agency that specifies the students' duties and responsibilities, expected deliverables, and time tables, as well as the agency's and SWCS' obligations in the collaboration.

It is interesting to note that the collaboration between the two lead organizations, the Center and the Foundation, continues to be based upon an informal verbal agreement. The higher level of involvement, the shared financing and the intermingling of the organizations' personnel, probably reduces the need for a formal agreement. Whereas the level of involvement with the partner agencies is much lower and the interface occurs primarily through the student interns rather than program administrators and CEOs.

The creation of MOUs with our partner agencies is another example of the emergence of more formal mechanisms as the organization grows and becomes more complex and there is a shift of power into the hands of administrative personnel. The MOUs specify in advance the expectations and deliverables. The SWCS administrators and agency directors negotiate the agreements prior to the arrival of the students. This takes the students out of the process of identifying needs and proposing solutions—a critical component of our original conceptualization of SWCS. Although we still encourage students to be initiators of change, the MOUs have put the identification of projects into the hands of program and agency administrators.

# Outcome Evaluation

This section presents the findings from the most recent SWCS outcomes assessments of student learning. Data on service delivery outcomes and partner agency satisfaction are available from the authors upon request.

## Student Field Survey

The following contains evaluation data on the students' learning experiences for 2002, 2003 and 2004. Field evaluation data were collected on all SWCS students and on a random sample of students in traditional field placement settings. The study subjects completed a 76-item questionnaire to examine differences in the learning experience between SWCS and non-SWCS placements. The instrument focuses on the students' opportunities to develop attitudes, skills, or knowledge related to the helping process, the use of self, and working with individual, family, group, organizational, and community client systems.

Six summative indices were created from the 76-item instrument. Each index represents a specific constellation of practice skills. The helping process index is

composed of eight items and has an alpha coefficient of .84. This index contains items related to the development of a helping relationship such as skills in assessing client needs, establishing goals and objectives, developing an intervention plan and termination. The use of a self index is composed of twenty items and has an alpha coefficient of .94. This index contains items related to the social worker's verbal and non-verbal communication skills such as, providing emotional support, communicating understanding, and empathetic responding.

The individual and family client systems index is composed of fifteen items and has an alpha coefficient of .93. This index contains items related to the worker's practice skills in working with individuals and families such as ability to engage clients in a purposeful helping relationship, obtaining needed services, and modifying interventions as needed. The group client system index is composed of seven items and has an alpha coefficient of .98. The organization client system index is composed of thirteen items and has an alpha coefficient of .94, and the community client systems index is composed of eight items and has an alpha coefficient of .96. These three indices contain items related to the skills needed to work effectively with group, organization and community client systems. Mean score differences between the students placed at SWCS and those in traditional placements are shown in Table 3. The scores shown below are based on the combined 2002-2004 student surveys.

**Table 2. SWCS and Non-SWCS Student Practice Skills Scores Combined 2002, 2003 and 2004 Data**

| Index | # items | alpha | SWCS | Non-SWCS | t score | P value |
|-------|---------|-------|------|----------|---------|---------|
| *The Helping Process* | 8 | .836 | 34.23 | 33.50 | .570 | .572 |
| *Use of Self in the Helping Relationship* | 20 | .942 | 84.47 | 87.00 | -.682 | .502 |
| *Individual and Family Client Systems (31-45)* | 15 | .927 | 55.70 | 55.67 | .010 | .992 |
| *Group Client Systems (47-53)* | 7 | .978 | 26.59 | 22.33 | 1.58 | .122 |
| *Organization Client Systems (55-67)* | 13 | .936 | 49.06 | 34.25 | 4.32 | .000 |
| *Community Client Systems (69-76)* | 8 | .958 | 24.35 | 13.92 | 3.92 | .000 |
| *TOTAL* | 79 | .968 | 274.41 | 246.67 | 2.05 | .047 |

As shown above, there were no differences between SWCS students and those in traditional placements in terms of the four indices that would reflect aspects of clinical and direct practice. Among these, SWCS vs. non-SWCS students scored nearly identical scores for the Helping Process (34.23 vs. 33.50), the Use of Self (84.47 vs.

87.00), Individual and Family Client Systems (55.70 vs. 55.67), and Group Client Systems (26.59 vs. 22.33).

Among these indices, however, were some differences on individual items that made up the indices (not shown on table). For example, in 2002 non-SWCS students reported greater opportunity to develop intervention and evaluation plans, and more opportunity to work effectively with client resistance. During 2002, students in traditional placement had significantly higher scores communicating understanding to clients, working with resistance and summarizing client concerns. The SWCS students had significantly higher scores on researching issues to inform practice and respecting cultural, ethnic and racial differences.

Greater differences, however, were found in the Organizational and Community Indices. SWCS students scored statistically significantly higher on both the Organizational Client Index (49.06 vs. 34.25) and on the Community Client Index (24.35 vs. 13.92).

Within these indices, significantly different individual items (not shown on table) included higher scores for SWCS students related to organizing and developing client groups, managing group conflict, developing staff training programs, make presentations to staff, evaluating agency services, conducting needs assessments, preparing grant proposals, identifying resources and funding sources, advocating for clients and workers, collaborating with other organizations, and team building. SWCS students also had significantly higher scores on items related to organizing community/neighborhood groups, making presentations at community meetings, advocating on behalf of client groups, organizing community coalitions and constituents, facilitating community meetings, assessing community functioning, and assessing agency reputation.

Overall, these data suggest no essential differences between the SWCS students and those in traditional field placements in terms of practice skills related to the helping process, use of self, and working with individual and family client systems. However, SWCS students had a clear pattern of significantly higher practice skills ratings on items related to group, organization and community practice.

## Student Focus Groups
At the end of the first three academic years, faculty members not affiliated with SWCS conducted focus groups with the SWCS interns. The following summarizes the findings from the three focus groups.

## Strengths
The students readily identified a multitude of strengths in the SWCS program. Overall, they felt they had an experience that other graduate students did not get and they were glad. They felt they were better trained in more areas of social work practice, were able to integrate the philosophy of social work commitment into real practice, and

developed cohesion among themselves and the faculty that was invaluable in their professional development.

Students identified strengths within the SWCS organization: the team approach, administrative support and supervision, exposure to various practice areas, and ultimately, their own growth as social workers were all emphasized repeatedly. Students felt that they had made a difference in the community and the lives of clients, and they were proud of it. For most, it helped solidify their dedication to the profession and validated their decision become social workers. Students also felt rewarded with the agency's dedication to the disenfranchised populations and their subsequent realization of their own commitment to social work practice.

Students assessed the ability to apply social work theory and skills in the macro areas, as well as micro areas, as invaluable and unique. Students saw the multitude of opportunities for social work practice as positive in that it exposed them to a variety of areas and populations, and allowed them to explore areas of interest, as well as areas that previously intimidated them. Working with other agencies and programs, as well as the commitment to the community, helped them to feel empowered as social workers as well as more knowledgeable. They were able to exercise a variety of social work skills in different arenas and, therefore, felt better trained and more aware of the holistic practice of social work.

## Limitations

Students in the first year focus group articulated a number of concerns and suggestions for improving the program. The primary issues identified were: inadequacy of the work and office space, the need for more organizational structure, more clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of program administrators, and the need for more staff training in preparation for working with various client populations served by SWCS. Many of these concerns disappeared by the second year as SWCS was able to make resource and administrative adjustments.

Other limitations identified were related to the newness of the organization, the challenges of the systems and populations served, some of the restrictions students experienced in applying specific theoretical orientations (e.g. the Functional Family Therapy Model utilized in one of the contracted programs), volume of work to be done, or the practice setting itself due to safety concerns.

More often than not, the limitations cited were countered with strengths about the same issue and identification of the subsequent dilemma. For instance, some felt out of "sync" with other classmates, particularly in the second year of their program, because of their unique field experience; but at the same time, found their experience at SWCS invaluable and worth the effort. In addition, some expressed that the unique nature of SWCS, being mostly comprised of students, results in a greater workload compared to more traditional internships, in which students have less responsibility for the success of the organization. At the same time, students balanced this concern with their

perception that the opportunity to be involved in leading the organization was one of the major benefits of the experience.

Each student expressed satisfaction with his/her placement at SWCS and the belief that they would make the choice all over again. They would also feel comfortable recommending the placement to others students, with hopefulness that any remaining limitations would be alleviated with the agency's continued growth. Findings suggest that SWCS students viewed SWCS as an empowering field placement setting in which they gain invaluable experience in a full range of social work practice areas.

## Discussion
**Comparing the Integrated Service Learning Professional Internship Model and the Traditional Professional Internship Model.**

The SWCS program provided a laboratory for comparing the learning opportunities associated with an integrated service-learning professional internship possible at a university-sponsored field placement setting and a traditional internship sited in an established human service organization. Table 3 below contrasts the learning opportunities of the two approaches to professional skills training

| Table 3. Integrated Service Learning/Professional Training vs. Traditional Professional Skills Training | |
|---|---|
| *Integrated Service Learning/ Professional Training Model* | *Traditional Professional Skills Training Model* |
| Emphasis on student empowerment | Emphasis on agency policies and procedures |
| Emphasis on client *and* community needs | Emphasis on client need |
| Students help develop field assignments and projects | Students plug into existing programs and services |
| Learning focused on civic engagement as well as skill development | Learning focused on skill development |

SWCS' students reported (see Student Focus Group section below) that the integrated model gave them confidence in being able to be effective in under-resourced communities and skills needed to engage directly with community members in order to identify community needs and support community development activities. In comparison, in traditional placement sites, skills development focuses on what those that the agency needs to ensure effective service delivery—which may or may not always be identical to the perceived needs of the community.

The creation of the SWCS program has had positive and negative impacts on both parent organizations. On the positive side, the Foundation, the Center and the

University have all benefited from the public relations associated with the program. The University and the Center received much good will and recognition for their increased involvement in the community. The University has pointed to the Center and SWCS as an exemplar to the rest of the university community for service-learning and university/community partnerships (Poulin, Silver, and Kauffman 2006; Silver, Poulin, and Wilhite 2006).

Similarly, the SWCS program has helped the Foundation solidify its leadership role in the community and its commitment to community revitalization. Being affiliated with a program that provides free social work services to community residents and assistance in strengthening the organizational capacities of community agencies had created positive public relations for the Foundation and has been helping in terms of generating funding for other service projects and programs. The SWCS program has also helped the Center with student recruitment by strengthening the Center's image and identity as an educational institution committed to social justice and the practice of social work with disadvantaged and oppressed clients and communities.

Social Work Consultation Services has also had a positive effect on the faculty involved with the program. It has given faculty the opportunity to make significant community service contributions as well as opportunities to become directly involved in the provision of social work services and organizational development and management. These opportunities have benefited the faculty members' teaching in their respective course areas.

On the negative side, the SWCS program has generated concern among some faculty members about the resources being devoted to the program and about a small group of students having a different learning experience than the other students. As a new and exciting program, some faculty felt that the attention paid to SWCS makes what they are doing appear to be less valued and not as fully appreciated. This has created some tension among the faculty. Overall, however, the majority of the Center's faculty supports SWCS and views it as a positive learning experience for students while strengthening the University and Center's relationship with the surrounding community.

The negative impacts for the Foundation are similar to those of the Center. During the first year of operation, SWCS was housed in the Foundation suite of offices. Without much warning, Foundation staff had to adjust to the infusion of students, staff and faculty members who were not socialized to the culture and norms of the organization. This invasion was disruptive for the Foundation staff and created some tensions between the staff and the SWCS program. The situation improved dramatically when SWCS obtained its own office space during year two and as the SWCS team became accustomed to the way things worked at the Foundation.

Overall, the positives have outweighed the negatives for both organizations. The community relations benefit has been significant, especially for the University that has had a history of strained community relations. The negative tensions among the faculty

have been relatively minor and limited to a small portion of faculty members. The resentment generated appears to be more idiosyncratic than systematic.

Most importantly, the process and outcome evaluation results clearly indicate that the Center is meeting the educational and community revitalization goals it set out to address. Students are experiencing an enriched field placement experience while engaged in service activities. At the same time, a significant amount of direct and capacity building service is being delivered to an under-resourced community.

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## Authors

Dr. Poulin is professor and former Director of the Center for Social Work Education at Widener University. Professor Poulin serves as Executive Director of the Social Work Consultation Services.

Dr. Silver is the Director of the Center for Social Work Education and Associate Dean for the School of Human Service Professions at Widener University. Professor Silver served on Widener University's Strategic Planning Committee that helped to "revision" the institution as a metropolitan university.

Dr. Kauffman is associate professor of social work of the Center for Social Work Education at Widener University. Professor Kauffman has written extensively on community organization and development issues.

John E. Poulin, Ph.D.
Center for Social Work Education
Widener University
One University Place
Chester, PA 19013
E-mail: jepoulin@mail.widener.edu
Telephone: 610-499-1145
Fax: 610-499-4617

Paula T. Silver, Ph.D.
Center for Social Work Education
Widener University
One University Place
Chester, PA 19013
E-mail: paula.t.silver@widener.edu
Telephone: 610-499-1150
Fax: 610-499-4617

Stephen E. Kauffman, Ph.D.
Center for Social Work Education
Widener University
One University Place
Chester, PA 19013
E-mail: Stephen.e.kauffman@widener.edu
Telephone: 610-499-1284
Fax: 610-499-4617