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## TRAINING THE DEAF IN SOCIAL WORK: AN UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM IN A MENTAL HEALTH SETTING

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In the Spring of 1970, a training program in social work for undergraduate students of Gallaudet College was initiated at Saint Elizabeths Hospital. This program, a pioneering effort with the deaf, was developed in response to an interest expressed by the College with regard to providing its students a field work experience with deaf psychiatric patients at the Hospital. Extensive planning and coordination between representatives of the Hospital and the College took place over a period of several months prior to launching the program. Careful planning and coordination were highly essential to integrating the academic program of the College with field work experiences of the Hospital for the purpose of achieving mutually consistent and complementary goals for student learning. Phillip Fellin, et al, emphasized the significance of this aspect of the school and agency relationship by describing it as a partnership in the interdependent enterprise of educating social workers. The point is made that "Both the school and the agency have essential, acknowledged contributions to make to the students' learning, and ideally, these should be well coordinated." The authors refer to a "transmission lag" as one common type of mal-coordination which "arises from the introduction of new knowledge in the classroom before that information has been transmitted to field instructors."<sup>1</sup> Careful planning and coordination at least minimize the "transmission lag" factor.

Additionally, joint planning and coordination facilitated mutual agreement between the school and the agency regarding expectations of the students and the appropriate matching of students with needed learning opportunities. The following elements were considered:

(1) Criteria for selecting students for the program. This included the determination that the student had completed certain prerequisite courses

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<sup>1</sup>Fellin, Phillip; Thomas, Edwin J.; and Freud, Clarice, "Institutes on Behavioral Science Knowledge for Field Instructors," *Journal of Education For Social Work, Council On Social Work Education, Spring 1968, p. 5.*

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and was functioning at an appropriate level of social and emotional maturity. The student was also assessed to have no other problems that would preclude a favorable working relationship with patients and staff.

(2) Student accommodations. This took into account available supervisory personnel; office space and facilities; case assignments; time and attendance; transportation and other resources,

(3) A system of rating student performance. The school maintains the responsibility for the progress of the student, such as grades, credits, amount of time in the agency and related issues. However, the agency maintains the right to refuse a student deemed unacceptable and to request the school to remove a student, if necessary; and

(4) A system of continuous communication and feed-back between the school and the agency regarding class work and student adjustment at the school and at the agency. This included planned, joint conferences between members of the school faculty and members of the agency staff, meeting on alternate occasions at the agency and the school. It also included frequent contacts between the author and the faculty representative coordinating the student unit.

### The Setting

Saint Elizabeths Hospital, created by Congress in 1855, is a Federal psychiatric hospital located in Washington, D.C., under the National Institutes of Mental Health, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The patient population represents a broad spectrum of social, legal, and medical-psychiatric categories. The Hospital provides comprehensive services to patients and the community through extensive treatment, training, and research activities. It utilizes a variety of resources and innovative approaches in carrying out its mission of promoting mental health.

This student training project is located within the Mental Health Program For The Deaf, which is a component of Saint Elizabeths Hospital offering a broad range of specialized services for patients with deafness and/or related communicative disorders. The Mental Health Program For The Deaf is designed to serve persons whose primary mode of communication is either the language of signs, the manual alphabet, the written word or some combination of these, or whose reception of communication is primarily visual.<sup>2</sup> The staff is, therefore, skilled in these communicative techniques. Our use of the term "deaf persons" refers to those individuals having deafness as a life style.

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<sup>2</sup>Robinson, Luther D., M.D., *Founder and Director of The Mental Health Program For The Deaf, and Acting Superintendent, Saint Elizabeths Hospital, 1970 (Mimeographed Materials on Eligibility Criteria).*

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### **Nature and Scope of Program**

The program is designed as an introductory training experience for deaf undergraduate students in social work and related human services. Since its inception in 1970, the training program has continued in succeeding years, with a new group of Gallaudet students reporting each spring semester, six hours per week for a period of sixteen weeks. This field work training is geared to students at the junior and senior levels who have completed certain basic social and behavioral science courses which are then supplemented with the practical field experience. Since the program began, sixteen students have completed the training course, including eleven in 1970 and five in 1971. There are six students currently enrolled in the program, representing the third group of trainees.

The training program involves the student in face-to-face work with the mentally-ill deaf, a special population of patients within this large psychiatric hospital. It exposes the student to a multidisciplinary setting with opportunities to observe and to collaborate with professionals of vastly varying backgrounds.

### **Program Goals and Objectives**

The general educational goals are: 1) to broaden the student's liberal education; 2) to prepare the student to enter graduate and professional training; 3) to recruit new personnel into para-professional and professional employment; and 4) to provide useful services to patients while offering learning opportunities to the student.

The program seeks to assist the student in achieving the following objectives: 1) greater knowledge and understanding of social and psychological problems of the mentally-ill deaf and of the network of social welfare services in the Hospital and community designed to reduce or eliminate such problems and meet human needs; 2) an awareness and understanding of such problems as deafness, social isolation, mental illness, family-breakdown, and the impact of these on individuals, families, and communities; 3) an integration of knowledge and theory derived from undergraduate, foundation courses with applicable field work experiences; 4) development of knowledge and a beginning application of some skills and techniques of social work practice such as interviewing, observation, fact-finding, analysis, and reporting; 5) some self-awareness and a sense of one's own value orientation; and 6) the ability to individualize the client according to his unique problems and needs.

### **Structured Activities**

As the student enters the program, he is provided a series of orientation activities including: an introduction to the organizational structure of the Hospital; a tour of the total Hospital facilities; an introduction to Hospital

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procedures, such as the special use of keys, confidential records, etc.; the availability of various resources; and the expectations of the program.

Each student is assigned to a field work supervisor for individual and group supervision. The student has access to the supervisor during daily activities and is expected to participate in scheduled supervision on a weekly basis.

The training experience includes observation of patients in their ward-living milieu, involvement in some formal and informal group meetings, and participation in one-to-one relationships.

The original group of students were given lectures and instruction in the principles and techniques of interviewing by Hospital staff. However, the College has subsequently picked up this function by adding interviewing and other essential courses in the curriculum. Each student is assigned one or more patients for social work services, including social study, assessment, planning, and intervention as indicated. The student is expected to attend clinical conferences involving patients; conduct interviews with patients and record the content of interviews and experiences to be submitted to the supervisor, who assists and participates as needed.

The supervisor supports and stimulates the student's learning, interprets the needs and behavior of patients, evaluates student performance and makes recommendations to the College regarding the student's progress and adjustment.

### Conclusions and Observations

The training program has been a challenging and stimulating experience. The students bring the usual freshness and enthusiasm to the work setting. They have varied widely in personality, capacity, and temperament. Thus, it has not been feasible to establish a consistent profile of the typical deaf student with regard to learning and adjustment patterns. However, one is impressed by the vast variation in emotional maturity, intellectual ability and academic preparation of deaf students who have entered the program. Generally, the deaf students have proven to be comparable to our hearing student in training programs at the Hospital. Possessing mutual communication skills and common life experiences, deaf persons might be superior to hearing persons as providers of services to the deaf population. This would be an interesting hypothesis to explore.

There has been a noticeable increase in student interest and enthusiasm in participating in the program this year. This perhaps reflects the increased preparation in course work at the College and an increasing realization of opportunities to occupy significant roles as providers rather than recipients of services.

The program has required and received maximum coordination between the Hospital and College. Such training opportunities seem highly essential to alleviate underemployment of the deaf population.

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Although we have not been able to determine the present status of all graduates, the following is known. Four of the sixteen students who have completed the training program are now employed in medical and social agencies serving the deaf. One of these is employed in the Mental Health Program For The Deaf at Saint Elizabeths Hospital. A fifth former student is now enrolled in a graduate school of social work, and another will be entering a graduate school of social work next fall.

The outcome of this program should stimulate and encourage continued and increasing interest in training and employment opportunities for the deaf. Such programs seem highly essential to the alleviation of rampant unemployment and underemployment within the deaf population. We cannot afford to waste or underutilize our vital human resources.