

Bridging the Gap Between Micro and Macro Practice to Address Homelessness in the U.S.-Mexico Border Region: Implications for Practitioners and Community Stakeholders

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Abstract: Research and scholarship efforts continue to promote the integration of micro and macro practice in social work practice and education. Despite this, scholarship has documented persistent challenges in the fluid integration between the domains of micro-level service provision and macro-level social change efforts in practice and academic programs. This paper outlines a successful bridge between the micro-macro divide in the form of community-engaged practice to address homelessness and social work education in the U.S.-Mexico border region. MSW students enrolled in a macro-level course at the University of Texas at El Paso's College of Health Sciences successfully partnered with the Opportunity Center for the Homeless, a grassroots community-based organization serving individuals experiencing homelessness. The narrative describes how students were effectively able to apply both micro- and macro-level skills learned in the classroom to an experiential learning environment while providing much-needed assistance to an underfunded community-based organization. A set of challenges and recommendations are also discussed. Research initiatives are needed to evaluate and test clinical and community work initiatives, including the use of photovoice methodology to address homelessness, while being responsive to community needs and challenges.

Keywords: homelessness, micro and macro social work practice, photovoice, community-engaged practice

Introduction

In concert with the profession's fundamental mission to enhance the well-being of all people and pursue social justice, social workers are trained to operate and foster change at multiple levels of practice. Social workers intervene on the micro level to promote the well-being of individuals, groups, and families, as well as the macro level to influence policy and address social injustices in the community, organizations, and broader society (Burghardt, 2014; Reisch, 2017). Indeed, the dual approach of providing individual service and promoting social change is a defining characteristic of the social work profession, and undoubtedly shaped by the profession's origins in grassroots community organizing. Despite this, connecting these two levels of intervention in theory and in practice has been a persistent challenge for the profession, and the perceived dichotomy between micro and macro practice continues to hinder the fluid integration of practice levels in generalist social work education (Fogel, & Ersing, 2016; McBeath, 2016).

Integrating social services and social change has been of particular interest for grassroots social change movements, as participants have been consistently faced with the challenge of providing social services to communities while maintaining their identity as social change agents (Moya, Stoesz, & Lusk, 2015). Contrary to frequent usage, macro social work is not 'indirect practice'

(Reisch, 2017). All social workers, regardless of practice area, work within the context of communities and organizations that are affected by the larger social environment and social policies (Soska, Gutierrez, & Santiago; 2016; Binder, 2007; Rodriguez, 2007). As such, there is a critical need within social work education to impart the fundamental macro practice skills of the social work profession into field practice, the classroom, and the community to create a more equitable balance between clinical practice, policy practice, and advocacy.

The present narrative describes the development of an experiential social work course designed to bridge the gap between micro and macro practice by using community-engaged scholarship strategies to address homelessness from a cause and case lens. Through this program, graduate students were able to integrate and apply micro and macro skills outside the classroom, while fostering collaboration between the university, key stakeholders, community organizers, and service consumers themselves.

The Course

As part of their graduate education, MSW students at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) are required to enroll in a Multicultural Macro Practice course, which prepares generalist social work practitioners for leadership roles within communities and organizations. In the course, students are challenged to employ a ‘big picture’ perspective that explores micro-level issues ‘outside the box’ and focus on the prevention of problems (Reisch, 2017). Students are introduced to macro practice as an embodiment of social work’s commitment to social justice and change by addressing fundamental barriers and promoting structural solutions to systemic inequalities and oppression that go beyond individual adaptation and resilience (Stepney & Popple, 2008; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

The course emphasizes that community engagement, social justice, enhanced relationships between community partnerships, and advocacy are required to bridge the divide between micro and macro social work practice. Students are encouraged to analyze how macro social workers play a role in transforming private troubles into public issues, as well as how to translate awareness of these issues into concrete policies and programs, with multi-level interventions at the individual, family and community levels (Mosley, 2017; Panwar, Nybakk, Hansn & Pinkse, 2016). The course provides an understanding of how community structures and processes affect the design and delivery of social services; how to foster and fortify collective efforts to empower individuals and families; and how to recognize how multi-faceted issues affect diverse communities differently (Traube, Begun, Okpych, & Choy-Brown, 2016).

As a faculty member in the Department of Social Work at UTEP who instructs this course, I am consistently confronted with the challenge of connecting levels of practice, classroom learning, and field experience, a challenge that is echoed by many of my colleagues. Every semester, I am reminded that the micro-macro divide is indeed not isolated to practitioners and researchers. With each new cohort of MSW students enrolled in the course, the stark contrast between the strictly clinical students, who bemoan policy and macro courses, and those strictly macro students, who would not dare enroll in a course on either clinical assessment or assessment and

intervention of their own volition, becomes quickly apparent. Throughout my experiences in teaching this course, it has been clear that for many students, engendering a sense of fluidity between micro and macro practice—in other words, ‘bridging the gap’—is best achieved outside the classroom.

In Fall of 2013, I invited a guest lecturer working in the field of social work to share his story and experience with the students. What began as a ‘typical’ guest lecture, however, quickly transformed into an opportunity to bridge the micro-macro divide, an opportunity I had long awaited.

The Guest Lecture

When I extended the invitation for Ray Tullius (Ray), founder and executive director of the Opportunity Center for the Homeless (OC), to conduct a guest lecture about the mission of the organization that he leads, the lecture was intended to simply provide students with a real-life example of macro-level, grassroots community organizing. Eventually, this developed into a much more profound, hands-on reimaging of macro social work education.

Ray began his lecture with the phrase, “A new social worker can move mountains,” and reminded the students that young professionals like them can make lasting differences. Immediately, Ray captured the students’ attention with his own personal journey of homelessness and resilience:

I was first introduced to homelessness in the 1980s, after a series of medical and emotional health crises that I suffered. I lived in the streets and in a homeless shelter and through the hospitality of friends. I knew that I wanted to help others facing similar circumstances. During my stay at the Rescue Mission [a Christian-based shelter for homeless adults in El Paso, Texas], I realized that homelessness was complex and that helping other people like me and my wife would require additional skills and expertise. I complained repetitively to the director of the shelter that the services of the facility were not appropriate and that the staff was not always sensitive to the needs of the poor. The director got so tired of my critiques that one day he turned to me and said, “Well Ray, fix it.” (Personal communication, December 12, 2016)

And so, Ray shared, he took the first step and enrolled at UTEP, ultimately earning a Bachelor of Social Work degree and trained as a generalist. When discussing his experience as an undergraduate, Ray’s feelings toward macro-level courses echoed those of the ‘strictly clinical’ faction of students, stating, “I must confess that I disliked the macro and the policy courses. I saw a huge divide between micro and macro practice and became quite impatient in the classroom and outside of it.” Throughout his course work, Ray shared his continued frustration with how homeless populations were treated and how policymakers continually failed to adequately address the issues underlying homelessness.

This frustration ultimately grew into action when Ray convened a coalition of community

partners to move forward in establishing a “one stop shop,” or day resource center for people experiencing homelessness. Ray described conducting a series of community forums with members of the homeless community. He reflected, “You could say that this was our first macro practice experience.” As instructor, my urge to interrupt and point out a crowning example of the connection between micro and macro practice was overshadowed by Ray’s intriguing lecture. He continued to describe his journey:

The El Paso Community College came on board and applied for funding to the state to develop an occupational opportunity center for the homeless. We initially had the center at the College but it did not really work, so my friend [a real estate agent] found us a community site. Shortly thereafter, realizing that to legitimize my work with home-free populations as a social worker, I needed to re-enter the world of practice and graduate education and despite facing academic and health challenges, I went back to school and got a Master’s in Social Work from the University of Texas at Austin in 1993. (Personal communication, December 12, 2017)

The students were inspired by his personal story and were discovering and reaffirming the interconnection of the case and the cause (Rothman, 2013; Abramovitz, 1998) of Ray’s personal story of homelessness and professional social work practice. Mr. Tullius had already touched on the micro-macro divide that continually presented itself in social work education and practice; the class was intrigued and moved, and students wanted to know more about how social workers like Mr. Tullius bridged the dichotomy of micro and macro practice. He continued with his narrative:

Let’s go back to the dream of establishing a resource center for the homeless and recommendations from the homeless community. The homeless people helped us piece the model together. They defined the services that they wanted to have in this facility. I realized that theory and practice are essential to the macro social work practice. I listened to many stories, talked to many people, and in partnership with El Paso Community College, helped secure funds to start the center. Lily [Ray’s wife] and I opened the doors to the Opportunity Center in January of 1994 with little more than brewed coffee and crumbs of doughnuts, hoping that no one would freeze in the cold nights. The first day we opened, only three persons came in. The second night it was five, by the third week we had close to a hundred. (Personal communication, December 12, 2016)

Students were quickly able to contextualize not only the connection between levels of practice, but were also given a glimpse into the fundamental basis of grassroots organizing: an understanding of the lived experiences of individuals informing large-scale social action to address structural inequities endured by the population. Ray continued to share how the center continued to grow, attributing much of the agency’s success to the persons whom the OC served:

As rapport with homeless people grew, I began to understand that each person had their own strengths. Essentially, the homeless were able to run the homeless shelter and gain experience, self-worth, and dignity. The assets that the homeless contributed were

bountiful. In 2002, a homeless grant writer was able to secure funding through the Veterans Administration to create one of the OC's shelters for Veterans. As funds grew, so did the Opportunity Center's services and residential facilities. With the new facilities arising, the Board of Directors of the Coalition for the Homeless was mainly focused on the growth of the Opportunity Center. The competition between other homeless shelters for funds created hostility, which ultimately led to the separation of the Opportunity Center from the Coalition in 2002 and the development of its own Board of Directors. (Personal communication, December 12, 2016)

The reduction of state and federal funds to address homelessness, the redirection of federal funds to support the Housing First model, and the loss of mental health funding for vulnerable populations created a significant competition for scarce funding among homeless shelters. When funding for vulnerable populations is limited and fragmented, tension is frequently encountered among grassroots community organizations and other nonprofits. Yet again, however, Ray's story proved the interrelatedness between micro and macro practice; that is, a lack of resources at the macro level - in the form of funding allocations reducing the scope of services available to individuals experiencing homelessness. Funding cuts experienced by the OC caused the organization to reduce social services and transportation and end the youth program.

Ray concluded the lecture by reflecting on the OC's growth, the work that still needs to be done, and his own personal investment as a person with experience of homelessness:

We have come a long way, yet much more needs to be done. Through the community's support over the years, the initial shelter, comprised of simply walls, a floor, and a roof with few amenities, has grown to four emergency shelters and six residential facilities to include both transitional and permanent housing. I call my work "recovery through service," and I have watched other homeless people recover by helping other homeless people. With a strong faith, and work cut out for us, I believe that my own personal recovery can be mitigated through continuously affecting social work change in the areas of homelessness in my community. (Personal communication, December 12, 2016)

By sharing his experiences with the class, students were able to contextualize the course's key concepts, and understand the awareness, knowledge, and competencies needed to address the multidimensional nature and impact of oppression, discrimination, and historical trauma. Using Ray's story as a framework for bridging the micro-macro gap, students began to discuss and address how social and economic justice are central values of the social work profession at all levels of practice.

From Micro to Macro

Ray's micro-level experience allowed students and I a glimpse into the challenges associated with addressing the needs of the homeless - both at the micro and macro levels - as well as the social injustices that prevail in the El Paso community. Using Ray's experience as a starting point, I began to conduct literature reviews to explore the 'big picture,' and identified a series of

social and economic injustices to humanize people experiencing homelessness, mitigate the invisibility of homelessness, enhance professional competencies, and respond to the needs of diverse populations. Several key structural, environmental, and contextual factors came to light as a result of this research. Suitable housing and health and human services were identified as critical for individuals at risk of homelessness and for those that are chronically homeless (Fox et al., 2016).

Analysis of the historical and contemporary perceptions of people experiencing homelessness revealed that traditionally, homelessness has been conceptualized as a poverty-related problem (Aykanian & Lee, 2016; Roos, Bjerkeset, Sondena, Antonsen & Steinsbekk, 2016). Within the larger social environment, people experiencing homelessness have been viewed as deviant, immoral, and in need of care or recovery. In particular, behaviors associated with chronic and street homelessness, such as panhandling and public drinking, have triggered negative perceptions of homeless populations from the early 1900s (Aykanian & Lee, 2016; Schiff, 2015).

Persons experiencing homelessness are among the most vulnerable and socially excluded, and they often find it difficult to access the services they need. Homelessness has been identified as one of the most extreme forms of social exclusion, and is associated with poor health outcomes for adults and children (Carson, Powis, & Imperato, 2016).

Nationwide in 2014, more than 1.48 million people stayed in a homeless shelter for at least one night, and almost two-thirds of them were individuals who were not part of family units (Greer, Shinn, Kwon, & Zuiderveen 2016). In El Paso, Texas in 2014, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), about 24%, or a total of 194,470 persons, lived below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Due to the highly transient nature of those unhoused, it is difficult to determine whether or not the number of homeless individuals falls solely under that same percentage in El Paso living under the poverty line. However, the 2016 Point in Time Survey conducted by the local Coalition for the Homeless revealed that a total of 1,227 homeless persons were counted on any given night during the January survey of the region (El Paso Coalition for the Homeless, 2016).

From Micro to Macro: Program Inception

From the micro experience that led the OC director to macro practice with homeless populations, and the research conducted thereafter, comes a reimagining of the MSW Macro practice course: one that is grounded in a ‘community of learning’ model. Once immersed in the research, I adapted the syllabus to create a more experiential macro practice and social action course for students. The macro course classroom became the Opportunity Center of the Homeless in the Fall of 2014, when the students visited the OC for a lecture presentation with Ray Tullius. Just earlier that morning, Ray had learned of a severe loss of funding, close to \$450,000 to his budget. Unsurprisingly, this news was devastating to the OC.

Ray informed the class that in 2013, the OC started to experience significant resistance from the Coalition for the Homeless, and in 2014 they suffered the most significant funding cut, leading

to the dismantling of the mental health and psychiatric clinic. He provided a brief background history on the organization and asked the graduating class: “What can you do to alleviate the impact of these cuts?” and “How can the University help out?”

Following the core values and ethical principles of the social work profession, we offered to work with the director and the OC team to develop plans to engage University administration and faculty in this deliberation. That summer, we secured support from the Dean of the College of Health Sciences. A series of individual meetings with the dean of the School of Nursing; the university president; the administrators of the Department of Social Work; and representatives from the Rehabilitation Counseling Program and the Center for Civic Engagement took place that summer as well. Administrators and faculty visited the OC to determine how optimal learning and partnerships could be formed to help mitigate the financial and service crisis, while educating students in health inequalities and social action. After several conversations with the OC director, his team, volunteers, and key stakeholders, the new team agreed that the best way to engage the University partners and students was to work through student instruction and macro-micro service learning experiences.

The Program

With the support of the College Dean and University President, we moved the MSW Macro class to the modest conference room of the emergency shelter for men at the OC in the Fall of 2014 (See Figure 1). Moving the students from the University campus to the OC was not easy. There were students that were fearful, skeptical, and worried about their personal safety, vehicle safety, parking, the agency’s host neighborhood, and the stigmas associated with being in a shelter for persons experiencing homelessness.



Figure 1. Macro course students at the Opportunity Center for the Homeless. Courtesy of the Opportunity Center for the Homeless.

These manifestations made clear that the students had personal biases and judgments that are barriers to effective professional practice. These findings reinforced the need to focus on core values and ethical principles of the social work profession.

We deemed it essential to structure and conduct the course in a way that effectively engages students while also bridging the micro-macro gap, providing hands-on experiences in grassroots organizations, and lending support to the underfunded agency. The course syllabus included lectures imparted by me and members of the OC team, neighborhood walks, a group community assessment, an intervention project, a case study presentation using liberating structures techniques, and a Healthy People 2020 proposal on homelessness (See Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Macro course students walking the neighborhood with Ray Tullius, Director of the Opportunity Center for the Homeless (OCH). Courtesy of OCH.



Figure 3. Macro students presenting macro interventions at the Mustard Seed Café, a neighborhood organization. Courtesy of the Department of Social Work.

Members of the OC team were present during some of the classes to observe the process, engage students, provide feedback, and conduct peer reviews of their assignments.

This type of co-instruction was both enlightening and rewarding for the students as well as team members of the OC. Students in the first Macro class conducted at OC successfully completed their semester, and overall course evaluations were very positive.

During the same semester, four graduate social work students and I volunteered to conduct a Photovoice Project (Moya, Chávez-Baray, Martínez & Aguirre-Polanco, 2015) on homelessness with the residents of the OC. The goal of the project was to increase awareness of the impact of homelessness and struggles associated with poverty, disparities, stigma, and oppression. The project aims were: to document how homelessness affects the mental and physical health, to understand how social stigmas can affect quality of life, and to create social awareness and mitigate misconceptions about people experiencing homelessness (Moya, Chavez-Baray, Martinez, Adcox, 2017). Through the Photovoice sessions, student facilitators and I framed the questions for the photography and narratives.

The participants identified mental and physical health challenges, broken health and human services, stigmas, and characteristics of their quality of life. Participants generated qualitative data describing the effects homelessness had on their mental and physical health through written documentation (Agarwal, Moya, Yasui, & Seymour, 2015; Catalani & Minkler, 2010; De Heer, Moya, Lacson, & Shedlin, 2008). The students helped to organize weekly group sessions, conduct content analysis, and mobilize participants to present their perspectives and address policy and decision makers during the Second Conference on Homelessness, hosted by the University in February 2015.

A three-part Homelessness Conference series was hosted at the University for the first time, during which students presented a call to action (Moya, Cox, Seymour & Chavez, 2015), humanized the experiences of persons experiencing homelessness through the use of stories and photographs, and leveraged support to strengthen the partnership between the University, OC, and organizations serving vulnerable populations (See Figure 4). Photovoice participants and social work student facilitators came together to create a gallery and a call to action that would later be showcased at the Texas State Capitol (Moya et al., 2017).



Figure 4. Call to Action Presentation led by Photovoice Project participants and students. Courtesy of the UTEP Department of Social Work.

From this case experience, a series of macro partnerships began to form between the OC, the University, the MSW Student Organization, and Think Tank on Homelessness, a group of agency directors and practitioners working to address homelessness in the community. Through this program, students were able to apply micro approaches learned in the classroom to macro-level social practice in the community. Engaging students and persons experiencing homelessness as collaborators during every step of the Photovoice project was crucial in creating a true community-based participatory research (CBPR) process. The CBPR foundation of the Photovoice project honored community members' expertise and contributions, and encouraged the residents to share decisions concerning research design (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

Outcomes and Impact

The community of learning at the OC generated a series of training opportunities for the students on participatory action research and macro social work practice. The Voices and Images of Homelessness project exemplified a creative, resourceful, and interdisciplinary community and academic collaboration. The project spanned six months and used a combination of strategies: a Photovoice project with persons who experienced homelessness; the formation of a multidisciplinary group of graduate students who worked with faculty to implement and evaluate the project; a three-part conference series on homelessness; a University-wide Centennial Lecture by Philip Mangano, an expert on homelessness, hosted by University President; and a small Community-Academic Engaged Research Project grant to follow-up with project participants and interview key informants (Moya et al., 2017).

Before long, the MSW Policy course students who were taking the course on campus during the

same semester discovered what the students in the Macro course at the OC had been working on. One of the class groups was intrigued and approached me to ask if they could focus on homelessness for their group policy action project. The group met with the OC team, Macro students, and residents, and identified basic shelter needs. The members of the MSW Student Organization joined the effort and conducted two food, clothing, and personal hygiene drives that generated more than \$500 and hundreds of food provisions for the residents.

At the end of the semester, students presented their intervention projects to the leadership of the center for review. There were two intervention projects that particularly stood out. The first intervention focused on the delivery of health and human services for the residents of the facility through a partnership between social work, other health disciplines, and community partners. The second intervention focused on integrating rehabilitation counseling and social work to assist the residents with employment and vocational services. These two projects illustrated the important role of collaboration and micro-macro level integration, and also served as the genesis for the Health Opportunity Prevention and Education (HOPE) Clinics, later described in this narrative.

In 2016, the Provost, in partnership with the University Center for Civic Engagement, hosted the first series of community tours of community-based organizations (including the OC) for faculty members. Within one month of the visit to the OC, four scholars from Social Work, Nursing, Clinical Laboratory Sciences, and Pharmacy, along with a cadre of students from these disciplines, came together to explore the two intervention project ideas that the students proposed. In the spring of 2016, 10 faculty members, 62 students, and 24 volunteers from 10 community agencies launched the HOPE project, the first health fair focused on persons experiencing homelessness at the OC and served 190 individuals (Moya & Solis, 2016a). Employment and rehabilitation became the central goal for the second clinic organized by the University Rehabilitation Counseling Program, through which over 99 persons experiencing homelessness and other community members were given an opportunity to conduct mock interviews, enhance their resumes, connect with rehabilitation and vocational services, and accept employment (Kosyluk, 2016).

In the fall of 2016, the third HOPE health fair was launched. The fair expanded its mission, and more community partners began contacting the OC, with eagerness to serve. This event was led by faculty and students and later became a model of practice. Nearly 141 residents were provided with HIV, HEP-C, and STI testing, vision and hearing services, clinical laboratory services, foot care, cancer screenings, mammograms, and flu vaccinations (Moya & Solis, 2016b). With the success of the HOPE fairs, Macro practice students began to directly impact individuals, families and the organization.

Continuing Impact

As partnerships solidified, so did the concern surrounding whether clients were receiving adequate aftercare and follow-up to the services provided by the HOPE fairs. Front-line OC staff and students began case management services to ensure access to aftercare, and reported back

major barriers to follow-up services that residents faced. The transference between policy and community involvement were shown to directly impact the needs of the clients on an individual level. In addition to fostering competence and expertise, this program highlighted the responsibility of social workers to support individuals' recovery goals.

This program brought to light how crucial sustained engagement, communication, and partnership building with communities are essential to build trust and confidence. Community engagement is a planned process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people to address issues affecting their well-being. The linking of the term 'community' to 'engagement' serves to broaden the scope, shifting the focus from the individual to the collective, with the associated implications for inclusiveness to ensure consideration is made of the diversity that exists within any community (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010).

Discussion

The MSW Macro Practice in Multicultural Settings course launched in 2014 at the OC became a community of learning where students, OC staff, and persons experiencing homelessness worked together as partners to shape a training course based on the dichotomy of 'case of cause' model. The experiences outside of the University classroom have provided great insights and practice wisdom of enormous value. In order for social work practitioners to understand organizational and structural contexts in which homelessness is perpetrated, it is imperative to examine the skills needed. According to Burghardt (2014), the pre-engagement phase is essential. This phase emphasizes the need for new practitioners to become engaged with an agency at its most outermost essence. For the professor and the Macro course students to effectively deliver services, pre-engagement with the center team was imperative. Understanding how the leadership of the OC framed their value and needs over time helped the professor and the students understand the contextual, political, and economic relationships, and power balances therein which impact homelessness on all levels (Burghardt, 2014).

Exposing the students to the organizational policies, structure of services, and populations served acted as a way of welcoming the class to the pre-engagement phase. The students were able to conduct community assessments on the various programs offered at the center. The engagement phase allowed students to identify the balances between systems of care and construct the interventions they believed would mitigate the ever-changing environment of the facilities. Seventy MSW macro students have participated in this community of learning process. Across their time at the OC, they have identified gaps in services and have created connections with outside agencies to establish community partnerships, avail additional resources and practice policy and advocacy skills.

Evaluation and Future Change

The leadership of the center allowed itself to be viewed from a critical perspective, and was receptive to structural changes and suggestions to raise awareness about homelessness, increase outreach to marginalized populations, integrate mental and health services, and launch university

and community based health fairs, brought forth by students. This engagement allowed for interventions to be developed based on community needs assessments conducted by students, effectively bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Students were moved from a University campus into a new venue of practice, wherein they influenced and engendered modest practice changes in a field setting to serve individuals experiencing homelessness. Balancing between manageable and meaningful macro intervention projects allowed for rich student creativity and learning. Moreover, the community of learning at the center built a learning platform for the identification of systems of oppression and the transference of those needs into opportunities, just as Ray's observations shared in the initial guest lecture transformed into the inception of the OC. This community of learning serves two purposes: (1) to provide critical support of organization staff, and (2) to develop community resources with a focus on retention and recovery of persons experiencing homelessness.

Macro students have studied the phenomenon of homelessness, analyzed the organizational structure of the OC, proposed systemic changes to management, and coordinated activities for homeless residents, and written proposals and grants to create new initiatives. This program allowed for the creation of an immersive learning environment, through the inclusion and empowerment of center residents, staff, and the students.

Next Steps

The OC and the Department of Social Work at UTEP are working on structuring a 'Center of Learning on and for Persons Experiencing Homelessness.' This concept will incorporate and expand on principles and skills that include short-term training like internships, fellowships, and professional continuing education. These practices will develop connections between theory and service within the setting of a homeless shelter, the concepts and principles taught in the classroom, and the internalized sense of professional identity that is continually evaluated and assessed. As such, students are able to think, feel, and act under the values and ethics of their field of study and practice. Communities of learning will assist the students and faculty in utilizing interventions that reflect a spirit of inquiry, based on structure of knowledge and theory pertinent to homelessness. Students will be encouraged to utilize specific, situation-applicable concepts and principles to seek new inquiry when needed in order to guide their profession. Seminars and field practice will engender personal and professional commitment to improve social functioning, affect change, and contribute to the research, knowledge, and skills needed to achieve these objectives.

Recommendations for Adaptations & Challenges

The needs identified initially by the center, which ultimately led to the development of this program, are not uncommon. Across the field of social work, grassroots community organizing, and nonprofit social services, funding cuts and scarcity of resources remain salient obstacles. As such, the model described in this narrative is well-suited for adaptation in other universities and with other community-based organizations, as it has shown to be beneficial to both student

learning, as well as to organizations with limited funding that require personnel assistance. Although the program described in this narrative was successful, it is important to recognize the challenges faced (or potentially faced) in the development and implementation of the program so that future adaptations of this model may be well-equipped to overcome these barriers.

First, within a university setting, liability and logistic concerns (e.g., transportation) surrounding off-campus teaching venues may create difficulties in garnering university administration support. Likewise, alternative teaching venues such as the OC may create concerns over safety, especially if these organizations are located in high-crime areas or neighborhoods that are perceived to be 'unsafe.' Within our program, students expressed discomfort or general concern related to the stigma of being seen entering a shelter for persons experiencing homelessness, or in a neighborhood considered to be 'poor.' I turned these concerns or challenges into teachable moments and encouraged students to further explore implicit and explicit biases.

Despite the challenges encountered and addressed, no students dropped the class due to these concerns. By holding classes at the OC rather than on campus, students were engaged in a rustic, humble setting that did not initially have all the tools and materials available in a traditional classroom. Lastly, maintaining a balance between the macro-level content of the course and the micro-level focus of individual residents' case focus was an important challenge to overcome; to address this potential issue, strict focus on how micro-level cases relate to and are affected by macro-level and policy issues is imperative. The social work mission is to help people in need and address social problems, to challenge social injustices, respect the dignity and worth of the individual, and recognize the central importance of human rights.

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