

Service-Learning: It's Just a Matter of Aligning the Stars

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The following case describes a service-learning project implemented by two counselor educators. The purpose of the service-learning project was two-fold: (a) to incorporate real-life counseling experiences into the academic preparation of graduate students majoring in counseling, and (b) to provide educational and career counseling services for a cohort of high school students participating in the upward bound program—GEAR UP.

This four-part case covers multiple topics important to counselor education. Ways to successfully implement service-learning projects are considered. As well, this case will allow future students pursuing a degree in counselor education to think about the professional, ethical, and legal components of any service-learning project, and how these components may be thoughtfully and adequately addressed. Finally, the case will promote discussions about the supervisory responsibilities of the instructors who incorporate service-learning opportunities into their academic preparation.

PART A: THE STARS

Cynthia Harrison filled out the last line of her application to renew her license, and she thought, "I must explain to my students how to apply for a license. They'll need to become certified and licensed once they graduate." Cynthia was a national certified counselor and a licensed professional counselor, and she also was a counselor educator. Prior to coming to the university to teach counseling, Cynthia spent several years as a practitioner in the field. So for her, it was always important to bring the "real world" to her graduate students and to their course assignments. Cynthia paused and thought about the students in her testing and appraisal class. The difficulty was finding "real world" assignments which were both developmentally appropriate and ethically and legally acceptable for graduate students.

Across campus, Karen Freeman looked over the list and shook her head. It was good news, and it was bad news. The cohort of GEAR UP students was growing. That was the good news. The cohort of GEAR UP students was growing. And THAT was the

bad news! Well, if not exactly bad news, it certainly suggested that finding new and innovative ways to serve the GEAR UP students were imminent. Karen thought, "I've got to get these kids thinking more about what they're going to do after high school **and** college!" As an associate professor in counselor education, Karen had written and received a multi-million dollar GEAR UP grant, and subsequently partnered with a local school system to provide a cohort of students with academic tutoring and college preparatory activities. Karen began the program five years earlier; and at that time, she administered career inventories to the then-6th graders. Now, the original group of students, as well as those students who had subsequently joined the program, was in the 11th grade. Karen felt it was time to revisit the idea of educational planning and career exploration to insure GEAR UP students were making the best short- and long-term academic and related college preparatory and future career decisions possible.

PART B: THE STARS ARE MOVING

The rain poured, and car lights arced across the wet pavement illuminating a confusing network of narrow side streets and small intersections. Cynthia wasn't lost – not completely; but she was anxious. She was worried she would be late for her meeting at the high school. She was worried her graduate students wouldn't be able to find the high school; and for the umpteenth time that day, she worried to herself, "Will this be OK? I hope this works out. I hope this was a good idea!" "This" was Cynthia's plan to volunteer her graduate-level counseling students to provide educational and career counseling services to a group of high school students participating in a GEAR UP program. The graduate students were enrolled in Cynthia's testing and appraisal class. Cynthia slowed her vehicle and peered at the sign which read "Central High School." The windshield wipers slipped lazily to the left and then to the right, as Cynthia swung her station wagon into the high school parking lot. Lights glowed from the lower floor of the building. Cynthia thought, "One of those rooms must be the library. I hope my students can find it!" One quick glance in the rearview mirror to smooth her hair, and Cynthia was out of the car.

Inside Central High School, Karen walked quickly down the hallway looking for the custodian. Her GEAR UP students were due any minute, and the door to the library was locked. It was almost 6 pm, and Karen had to get the GEAR UP kids squared away with dinner and to the library before Cynthia and her graduate students arrived. When Cynthia heard about the GEAR UP program, she'd contacted Karen to inquire about ways her graduate students might contribute to GEAR UP. They discussed several activities, and Cynthia suggested the possibility of engaging in some family counseling activities with GEAR UP students and their families. But in the end, Karen pushed for educational and career testing. Karen explained that it was

her desire to see that the GEAR UP students were making good academic choices today so that their potential for college admission and positive career choices were enhanced. Cynthia agreed, and said that "on second thought" she had decided that family counseling was probably beyond her graduate students' current (professional) developmental level.

Karen spotted the custodian, and quickly approached him about unlocking the library. Karen then rang the cell phone of her GEAR UP project manager, Alisa. When Alisa answered, Karen asked, "Where are you with dinner? Have the kids finished eating yet?"

"Yes, answered Alisa, "And we're on our way to the high school, but the weather is terrible. I'm driving pretty slow because there are a bunch of cars with students and parents following me. We just about took up the whole restaurant. How is Dr. Harrison's class going to handle all of these kids?"

"Don't worry about that right now. We'll figure it out." responded Karen. "Just drive carefully, and get here safe." Karen took a deep breath, and headed for the library.

Outside, Cynthia spotted a cluster of her graduate students near the back entrance to the high school. They were crowded beneath a scattering of umbrellas, and it was clear from their smiles and nods, that they were relieved to see Cynthia hurrying towards them. "The door's locked, Dr. Harrison! Is this the right place?" Before Cynthia could answer, the door pushed open, and Karen's voice boomed, "Welcome to Central High School. We've been waiting for you! Come on in and get out of that weather." The students moved forward, and Cynthia followed.

Cynthia blinked in the bright lights of the hallway; and as she glanced around, she felt Karen slip up beside her. In a soft voice, Karen said, "I hope your folks are ready for this. We've got a record crowd tonight. Last count was about 80 students and some of them brought their parents. They're on the way here now."

Cynthia's eyes widened. "That means we'll need to more than double up with the grad students," she responded. "I mean I only have 15 students in the class."

"Yes, I know," said Karen. "I figure each grad student will work with about five or six GEAR UP kids; maybe more if their parents are there."

"Ok," said Cynthia. She paused, and then said, "My students should be fine. You and I will just need to be very visible. I don't want my students to get into any trouble

from a supervisory point of view. We've conducted role-plays in class, but that was one-to-one, not one-to-five or six."

Karen nodded, and pointed to the grad students who had congregated on the far side of the library. "Looks like we better bring our 'would-be counselors' up-to-date."

Cynthia and Karen walked across the room to the grad students. Cynthia noted that their facial expressions ranged from mild curiosity, to nervousness and to concern, to outright fright. Cynthia smiled at the students, and once more, introduced them to Karen. Then she spoke, "Well, I've got some good news, and I've got some better news. Which would you rather have first?" The students looked at one another uneasily. No one spoke.

"Ok, well, then," said Cynthia, "here's the deal. The good news is that we'll be counseling more GEAR UP students than we originally thought." Cynthia waited for the students to take in this information. No one spoke. Then she said, "And the better news is that we'll have an even greater practice and learning opportunity tonight. Not many counseling students have the chance for such a terrific in vivo experience." The students eyed her uneasily, and, still no one spoke.

Finally, one student raised his hand, and in a soft voice, asked, "How many kids *will* we be seeing tonight, anyway?"

Cynthia and Karen glanced at one another, and then Karen said, "About eighty, and maybe a few parents."

With this news, one student named Angela piped up, and said, "Oh no! Oh my! Dr. Harrison, my stomach tells me that I'm not ready for this. You know I have stomach problems, and right now, I feel like my stomach is saying *no, no, no!*"

PART C: THE STARS ALIGN

To reduce tension, Cynthia laughed warmly, and touched Angela lightly on the shoulder, saying, "Yes, I know. Eighty plus people is a lot!" Then speaking to her students, Cynthia said, "I know none of us were expecting this many kids, and it probably feels a little overwhelming to everybody, including me. But neither Dr. Freeman nor I would let you do something we didn't feel you were prepared to do. We'll be close by, and if at any time you feel you need help or assistance, you just raise your hand. We'll be right over!"

Karen agreed. "This is a real-life experience, and the first time that happens, everyone

feels a little bit afraid. But Dr. Freeman and I are both national certified counselors, and Dr. Freeman is a licensed professional counselor. We feel like we can provide you with the supervision and guidance you need. After all, you'll be right here in the library, and we'll have full view of you and the GEAR UP kids. Rest assured if we think you're getting into any trouble, we'll be right at your elbow."

Another student, spoke up, saying, "What about paperwork? We'll we have to provide documentation for each GEAR UP student we see?"

Cynthia laughed, and said, "Yes, you will. But with as many GEAR UP students as we have, the nature and the magnitude of the exercise have changed. Next week we'll take a look at your syllabus and figure out a fair grading solution. For now, we have to focus and think about why we're here. The truth is, as unnerving as all of this may feel, this is real life; and no class assignment can better prepare you for your future as a professional counselor than an in vivo experience such as this. So let's all take a deep breath and remember that helping these kids and their parents is our goal."

Cynthia's students seemed to relax, if only slightly. Karen took this as her cue, and directed the graduate students to various tables where the GEAR UP kids and their parents were already settling themselves. Karen spoke up and formally opened the evening by thanking GEAR UP and kids for coming to the educational and career exploration night. She then introduced Cynthia and her graduate students, and asked Cynthia to say a few words.

Cynthia briefly described the purpose of the evening. She explained that this was a practice exercise for her students, and that the graduate students would be administering a career assessment inventory to the GEAR UP students. This activity would be followed by scoring the inventories and discussing the results and how these results might play into current educational and career planning. Cynthia further stated that given the educational and career counseling session was not being conducted in a private and confidential area, the GEAR UP students, parents and their "counselors" would adhere to the standards of confidentiality outlined in the group counseling guidelines. Cynthia then introduced her graduate students, and as an ice breaker, she asked her graduate students tell the crowd a "surprising fact" about themselves. Cynthia modeled the request by initiating the ice-breaker, and telling everyone that one surprising fact about her was that she had five small dogs, and that the dogs were named for people in her family. The GEAR UP students and their parents seemed to enjoy and appreciate this opening gambit, and Cynthia noted that as her students shared their "surprising facts," they began to relax even more. "Good," she thought,

“folks are warming up!”

After the ice breaker, Cynthia invited the group to continue with the educational and career counseling process. She noted that for the most part her graduate students approached their “clients” with professionalism. She knew her students were still somewhat apprehensive, yet they conveyed a sense of calm, facial expressions composed, as they initiated the “get to know you” segment of the session. For the next two hours, Cynthia and Karen watched over the graduate and GEAR UP students as they interacted with one another. The two professors would later remark to one another about not only how they should give each other the proverbial “pat on the back” for connecting the graduate and GEAR UP students together, but upon the substance of the experience as well. Karen and Cynthia agreed that a “true counseling experience” had occurred for both the graduate and high school students; and only in those cases where the graduate students needed clarification or simple questions answered about the career assessment instrument did the professors have any cause to provide direct supervision. The atmosphere in the library was warm, genial, and pleasant; yet, at no time were either the graduate or GEAR UP students separated from the task at hand. Rather, they remained focused on the educational and career exploration exercise.

Towards the end of the evening, Karen once more spoke up to the large group, saying, “I just want to thank everyone again for coming out to this event. I also want my students and their parents to know that they will be receiving a report from Dr. Harrison’s class within the next two weeks. This report is called a Career Decision-Making Report, and is simply a written version of the educational and career discussions which took place here tonight.”

PART D

The following week Cynthia met with her appraisal class. Her plan was to provide students with ample opportunity to process the practice exercise event from the week before, and then to move to her lecture materials. As Cynthia entered the class, she found her students clustered in small groups talking with one another. They were obviously animated, and the “buzz” in the room conveyed a sense of real excitement. As Cynthia opened discussions about the practice experience, her students began speaking at once. The consensus was that the students felt very good about themselves for having accomplished the in vivo counseling experience. All agreed that the experience had allowed them to internalize a stronger sense of professional identity. Everyone also strongly believed they would “do it all again” if given the chance, and they universally recommended that the practice exercise should be made available to future counseling students.

To all of this, Cynthia smiled, and responded, "Wow! That's certainly an excellent evaluation. I'll make sure Dr. Freeman hears your remarks. But what about ways to improve the experience? We know as professional counselors that there are always areas for continued development. I would like for you to think about ways I could modify or amend the practice exercise to enhance the experience for both graduate and GEAR UP students. I want to hear our ideas."

The most frequently suggested modification was to provide future graduate students with greater opportunity to practice and prepare for the *in vivo* experience. It was evident that most students considered themselves somewhat under prepared for the exercise, and that this had contributed to the feelings of uncertainty which had permeated the first part of the evening. The second most frequently suggested modification included dividing the counseling event between two evenings. The graduate students believed this would give the GEAR UP students more time to think about their educational and career choices, as well as to discuss their thoughts with their graduate student "counselor." However, as students continued to talk with Cynthia about the GEAR UP practice experience, they returned to their original position which was to say they thoroughly enjoyed the practice exercise. They stated they were grateful for the opportunity, and even though there had been moments of "high anxiety," in the final analysis, they "felt like counselors." As one student concluded, "And that's what it's all about, isn't Dr. Harrison."

"Yes," smiled Dr. Harrison. "I believe it is."