

# Going Far; Going Together: A Learning Community Model for Human Service Education

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Research over the last 25 years informs us we learn better, heal faster, and are more productive and healthier when we feel connected to others. How can we infuse these compelling findings into our Human Service programs to promote student retention, improve learning outcomes, and positively impact our clients and communities? One option is the Learning Community. This approach has been successfully utilized for over 40 years by Allegany College of Maryland's (ACM) Human Service Associate Degree Program.

Originally developed in 1973 by the Program's first Director, Paul Potesta, this approach to human service education provides a rich opportunity for students to learn from classmates and faculty while experiencing the challenges and benefits of building a healthy, supportive community. Self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and an understanding of the healing power of relationships are acquired not only from classroom and field work instruction, but also in the real world laboratory of the cohort community.

## Conceptual Components of the Program

### *A Relationship Centered Learning Community Approach*

Research and best practices from the fields of integrative health, social work, and education infuse ACM's learning community approach. Using a selective admissions model, 17 students are accepted into the Clinical Phase: a sequential, four semester cohort group of students who enroll in the required skills classes with two full-time Human Service faculty. Clinical Phase students and faculty are partners in a common journey for personal insight, trust, competence, wellness, and the development of community. Skills are continuously practiced to insure the transfer of learning beyond the educational setting into personal and professional practice.

### *A Psycho-educational Framework*

The psycho educational model (training as treatment) empowers students to experience the stages involved in personal and community change. In turn, students model, teach, and co-create the same process with clients. The guiding principle is "We walk our talk."

### *An Active, Experiential Learning Methodology*

Classroom and field instruction draws on the work of Maryellen Weimer, Robert Barr, and John Tagg as well as activist educators Paulo Freire and Myles Horton. All emphasize the importance of active, relationship-based learning which engages the emotions and is relevant to student lives and career goals. Parker Palmer's emphasis on inward reflection and self-knowledge as a tool for outward action is another cornerstone of the Program. Cohort community meetings provide a laboratory for developing these self-awareness, interpersonal, decision-making, problems solving, and conflict resolution skills.

### *A Focus on Civic Engagement, Social Justice, and Empowerment*

The Program embraces a community organization/community development approach which addresses the root causes of social problems versus symptoms. Health/mental health challenges and social problems are viewed through the lens of community and cultural values, power, and civic engagement. Engaged citizens and empowered communities are seen as foundational units of social change and human service professionals as leaders in fostering the democratic process.

### *A Holistic, Solution-focused, Strength-based Model of Health and Healing*

A strong emphasis is placed on the student's development as a total person (mind/body/spirit). The focus on strengths and the importance of community in the healing and change processes emerge from the work of noted psychologist and author Bill O'Hanlon and psychiatrist Dr. James Gordon, Executive Director of the Center for Mind Body Medicine ([www.cmbm.org](http://www.cmbm.org)). This framework promotes the belief that people are capable of positive change and that individuals, families, and communities have a natural and intrinsic healing capacity. The role of spirituality in healing and self-care is heavily emphasized.

## Challenges

Like democracy itself, creating and living in community is messy, unpredictable, and requires constant attention and commitment. However, most students have been educated in an individualistic, hierarchical

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system where they are passive recipients of information dispensed by “experts” (teachers) according to established classroom rules. Grades, not learning, are the focus; students are encouraged to compete for status.

A learning community requires just the opposite: deep listening (versus merely hearing), active involvement, shared responsibility and collaboration, vulnerability on the part of both student and faculty, diverse and conflicting ideas, mistakes as opportunities for growth, a focus on learning (versus being educated), and an internal development of values, personal meaning, character, and style. Since few students have experienced this type of learning, the learning community can initially be perceived as chaotic and the teacher as “not doing their job”.

However, students emerge from the Program expressing a profound sense of self-confidence, a deep respect for the empowering aspects and skills of living in community, a tolerance for change and uncertainty, and an awareness that getting through challenging situ-

ations is not only a result of personal strength and skills, but of the support and resources of the community. These outcomes are documented in written assessments and oral reflections given during final semester student exit interviews as well as surveys done with graduates, employers, and field supervisors.

In addition to skill and personal development, alumni surveys cite the following three “learning communities” which continue beyond graduation:

- lifelong personal friendships with classmates
- a support system with other Human Service graduates as they enroll in advanced degree programs at area universities
- a multi-generational “old boy/girl mentoring network” of alumni who share common values, experiences, and a commitment to the Human Service “family”

ACM’s Human Service Program has created a life-long learning community which illustrates the old African proverb: *“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together”!*