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**Promoting Child Welfare: Training Professionals to Support Health Marriages,  
Relationships and Families Project (PCW—HMFF)**

**Post Graduation Trainee Survey Results**

In the fall of 2003, an interdisciplinary group of college faculty received a five-year training grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration of Children and Families for “Promoting Child Welfare: Training Professionals to Support Healthy Marriages, Relationships, and Families.”

Working with an interprofessional coalition of child welfare professionals, the team reviewed current literature and “promising practices” in marriage, relationship, and family intervention; tapped local professional knowledge to identify common barriers to healthy relationship formation in the child welfare population; identified competencies for professional work in this area; and developed a masters-level curriculum to train future professionals in the support of healthy marriages, relationships, and families. The project focused particularly on the identification and development of policy and practice interventions appropriate for racially, ethnically, and economically/resource diverse populations who are a part of the child welfare system.

Forty Master’s and Doctoral level students in child and family studies, marriage and family therapy, and social work were selected to receive one-year of specialized training, with preference given to those students currently working in the child welfare field, or who committed to entering the field after graduation. Participating students received partial tuition support from the grant, took a specialized course in healthy marriage, relationship, and family formation, participated in a series of seminars that helped to integrate learning into practice, enrolled in an elective course that was identified as relevant to the specialty and completed a yearlong internship, where they applied the skills learned in the course. Internships allowed for the newly developed curriculum to be field-tested and adjusted. Our first cohort of student trainees came in August 2004, followed by the second cohort in August of 2005 and the last cohort in August of 2006. One additional student received a partial scholarship to focus on developing an annotated bibliography concentrating on the link between child abuse and neglect and the health of the parenting couple’s relationship/marriage.

An electronic survey was developed and implemented in June of 2008 (See appendix A) to determine the outcomes for our students post-traineeship. The following report summarizes the results of that survey.

We did not include our last scholarship student in the survey because he did not participate in the full traineeship experience including taking the course and a field placement. Of the 40 possible students to answer the survey we collected responses from 32 former trainees. We gathered the following information.

### ***EDUCATION RELATED QUESTIONS:***

- Nine trainees from 2004-2005 and another nine from the 2005-2006 cohorts participated in the survey comprising 58% of the respondents. The remaining 41.9 % of the respondents were students from the last cohort in 2006-2007. Thirteen out of thirteen students from this year responded. One student skipped this question.
- 89.7% or 26 of the respondents are professionally employed, 17.2% or 5 are pursuing their doctoral degree and 10.3% or 3 people indicated other choices including foster parenting, traveling and teaching in Europe, and considering the pursuit of a doctorate degree or changing professional employment altogether.
- 93% or 27 of the students completed their master's degree, 3.4% or 1 student has completed their doctorate, 3.4% or 1 student has received a second master's degree and 3.4% or 1 student is currently pursuing a doctorate. Three students skipped this question.
  - 23 students delineate their field of study for the above mentioned education levels as the following:
    - 15 as social work
    - 2 as Social Work – Individual, Group and Family Therapy
    - 3 indicated marriage and family therapy
    - 3 indicated child and family studies
    - 9 skipped this question
  - Four students or 12.9% are continuing to pursue their education on a full time basis.
- When asked if the healthy marriage/relationship training they received through the project was of assistance to their current educational training, of those answering 76.7% said yes and 23.3% said no. Two trainees skipped this question.
  - A sampling of comments from people answering yes included:
    - “The class has been useful in helping families that I work with. Additionally, course materials are often relevant, useful references for me.”
    - “I was involved in a premarital training project for the last 2 years, teaching premarital relationship skills material and doing research.”
    - “It was helpful in understanding how marriages and relationships affect children.”
    - “Since graduating, I have worked with diverse populations, including adolescents and their families, and adult males in a forensic psychiatric setting. In all of my positions, I have been better able to understand family connections, different types of marital communication patterns and understand how the theories learned can be used to create effective change within these systems.”

- “I currently work with children who have public aid and run across a lot of adult issues regarding their parents....including marriage/relational issues which are directly affecting the children.
  - This training provided me a valuable background in my day to day work with families. I have utilized this training to develop wellness programs for families and healthy relationship trainings for individuals and couples.”
- One student has pursued in depth training on a specific marriage/relationship education program, PREP and its derivative “Within My Reach,” since graduating from the traineeship.
- When asked if the training had an impact on research decisions or activities, 57.1% said no as they are not pursuing research. However 42% or 12 said yes and the following highlights some of their explanations:
  - “In considering the effects of poverty on marital relationships, I find that I utilize my knowledge regularly with clients.”
  - “I’m still working on completing my thesis and the class really delved into issues relating to my thesis topic. The class also raised my awareness of issues in therapy that I had known nothing about prior to the class.”
  - “I focus on the effects that relationships have on children and seek research in this area.”
  - “I completed and presented a paper at the NCFR conference in 2006 on blended families and marriage therapy programs.”
  - “At my current place of employment I actively develop and deliver healthy relationship trainings to families, couples and individuals.”

### ***EMPLOYMENT RELATED QUESTIONS***

- 91.3% or 21 of the 23 respondents are professionally employed. One is currently pursuing employment, one is on a family leave and one works in a field other than human service work. Nine trainees chose to not answer this question.
- Trainees work in both national and local agencies. Examples of the nation-wide agencies include Catholic Charities and The Salvation Army. At least 4 trainees can be found in government based departments of social services and mental health. The remaining are in local agencies such as:
  - Syracuse Community Health Center
  - Liberty Resources, Inc.
  - Garden City Counseling Center
  - Community Counseling Centers of Chicago
  - Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota
  - Schools
- Twenty-four students identified their employment as being located in seven states including New York, Georgia, Florida, California, Maryland, Minnesota and Illinois. The majority are employed in upstate New York.
- Work titles included Social Worker (School, Adoption, Clinical and Foster Care), Individual and Family Therapists, Family Preservation Case Manager, Community School Coordinator, Mental Health Therapist, Program Coordinator, Supervisor, Child Mental Health Counselor, Social

Service Case Manager Specialist, etc. We do have one student who entered the military and while not working in a human service position, we are proud to say that her title is Second Lieutenant.

We asked trainees to tell us a little about the consumers/clients that they work with. Most of the trainees work with clientele from all demographics. On average, the trainees estimated that 75% of the clientele they serve would be considered low income, 20% medium income and 5% high income. Also using averages the trainees identified marital status as the following:

Single	35%
Cohabitation with Opposite Sex	13%
Cohabitation with Same Sex	> 1%
Civil Union	> 1%
Married	17%
Separate or Divorced	13%
Youth without Marital Status	24%

The majority of clientele served by our trainees working professionally are of European descent (36%) or African descent (27%). The next two largest populations were Hispanic/Latino and Mix/Other Heritage each at about 14%. People of Asian or Native American descent made up the remaining. There did not appear to be a significant immigration population being served at this time. Trainees were given the opportunity to add any other relevant demographic information about the population they work with.

- Many noted that they work with seriously ill or emotionally disturbed children as their primary clients.
- Several pointed out that they work in high poverty and crime areas or from inner city and rural areas.

When asked if their clients attend services primarily on a voluntary or mandatory basis, the trainees responded in an almost even split, 54.5% and 45.5% respectively.

We asked if they worked with families, couples and/or children in other capacities about half of the trainees who are employed professionally indicated that they do. Explanations included:

- Foster parent working extensively with the children's biological mother before she surrendered her rights.
- Part time private practice therapy.
- Part time as a therapist with an agency that provides intensive services in the homes of clients involved in child protective services.
- Teach social skills to children with autism.
- Volunteering in school, community and religious settings.

Only one individual indicated that they facilitate marriage and/or relationship education program. However, one other individual did comment that he/she refers clients to the local Healthy Marriage/Relationship classes offered by P.E.A.C.E., Inc.

## ***IMPACT***

Forty-six percent of the students felt that taking the specialized traineeship was helpful in securing their current job. The majority of these or 67% of the trainees indicated that participating in the specialized traineeship added value to their resume and credentials. These trainees, approximately 21%, also indicated that the number of job opportunities increased as a result of the traineeship. For 17% of the trainees responding positively to the initial question indicated that the traineeship was specifically discussed in their job interview. None of the employers were specifically looking for credentials in marriage and relationship education.

When trainees were asked the open-ended question “has the training influenced your ability to perform your current work responsibilities?” they responded with:

- Increased sensitivity to the dyad’s needs and strengths which impact their relationship as the functioning of their children.
- Increased sensitivity to events precipitating relational discord and increased competency when responding to relational discord within the family dynamic.
- The training has helped assess and plan for other dynamics within the system that can affect the child being worked with.
- Increase knowledge of the options available for clients.
- Now have good assessment tools and other materials such as the toolkit to support work with families and couples.
- Parental relationship is examined more that would have been without the training and adds an additional lens to use when viewing a clients situation.
- Increased comfort in exploring couple issues within a family as well as recognizing the impact of adult relationships on the functioning of the family.
- Offered a different perspective on relationships.
- Increase competency in dealing with families from a variety of cultural and economic backgrounds.

Trainees were asked “How has the training influenced you as a professional?” The responses can be summarized in four significant areas. Trainees have an increased awareness of all family relationships and their interconnectedness. They have the professional knowledge, skills and other tools to confidently address the varied issued presented by struggling families and couples making them more well-rounded and committed professionals. Finally, they feel that they have a thorough understanding of what a healthy relationship is helping them to focus, with greater confidence, plans and activities accordingly.

Often knowledge seeps into practice informally and trainees were asked if they used the knowledge and skills learned in the traineeship informally in their work. The majority or 63% said yes. Their commentary included some of the following:

- When working with an adolescent teen mother, engaged in a volatile relationship with her child’s father whom she planned to marry, I was able to review with her relationship communication patterns, review techniques with her on how to change these patterns and referred her and her partner for more detailed counseling.

- Most foster parents avoid relationships with birth parents but I was able to fully engage with our sons' birth mother and gain her trust. It was essential when she later realized she was unable to care for them.
- Trainees found they were better equipped to point out to parents' unhealthy patterns that impact their children and identify domestic violence within relationships earlier.
- There have been times when the identified client is a child or teen. However, once I began my work, I realized that a lot of the child's behavior was a result of the parent's relationship.

The curricula developed and provided the trainees introduced marriage/relationship programs and targeted skills were taught that in turn could be taught to clients. In addition, trainees were given a brief overview of program development. In the survey we ask if the trainees were comfortable starting and implementing a marriage/relationship education program. Of the 32 respondents to the survey, 24 answered this question with 63% of these being in the affirmative.

The comments provided by the 24 trainees who responded to the question regarding what they felt were the most important lessons that they took from class were very enlightening. In their own words.....

The ability to understand patterns of communication in a marriage and the broader implications of these patterns on the other family members namely the children.

To make sure my own marriage is healthy for the sake of my children.

I learned that there is massive information available on healthy relationships but they are under utilized for the lower economic status population.

The impact of poverty on dyads.

The manner in which a couple defines who they are.

I find that I use Gottman's book regularly.

Diversity, patience and hard work.

Learning different strategies for how to be an effective therapist.

Marriage education is important and necessary.

I was lucky to apply this knowledge in a college context where premarital education was taught as part of the course curriculum.

Different marriage and family resources.

The most important lessons from this program are that I can understand family dynamics in various ways.

Increased respect for people and circumstances that are different from my own. The power of structural forces on the lives of people. The unintended effects of legislation on implementation of social programs. The importance of the quality of relationships on people's lives.

Sensitivity to diverse perspectives/beliefs associated with relationship building /meaning/roles.

Learning different ways to work with couples in order to improve their relationships along with the children involved.

How to maintain healthy relationships, how to help others maintain healthy relationships, and the key dynamics to relationships in general.

One thing that stands out and that I have used professionally and personally was the importance of communication in a relationship and the way disagreements are handled. Teaching couples how to argue to come to an agreement and not damage the relationship further.

The importance of emphasizing the value of BOTH members in a couple and strongly encouraging them to participate in services TOGETHER.

The discussion of how cultural values affect relationship dynamics.

The strength of family relationships can overcome many odds if one is willing to communicate problems they encounter with others in the family system.

That families are impacted on a systemic level. Effective treatment involves working with families and helping to solve their problems at all levels - micro, mezzo and macro.

Increased my awareness of the many struggles of families in poverty

Being instructed in several therapies and theories in the field of marriage and families.

The research and how to apply it to the population that I serve.

Broad definitions of relationships and also clear guidelines and expectations for what a healthy relationship looks like.

To look at the BIG picture; LISTEN to all parties: LOOK at all points of view; NEVER discount anyone.

Learning laws and multicultural issues.

Trainees were also asked about the value of the traineeship to their overall educational experience. The 24 out of 32 respondents who answered offered their insights and a sampling follows:

- It added another dimension to the clinical experience ... which is not offered in any other course in the same depth and detail.
- It provided another perspective in working with couples and families.
- Gave me more avenues to pull knowledge from.
- It was a great opportunity to be involved in the program, especially since only a few were selected for it. I found it to be very valuable even though it was very different from my other classes as a Child and Family Studies major.
- The overall value has been excellent. I have been able to use the classroom lectures and resources in my work with couples with open child protective cases. For instance, I utilized the deep empathy exercises, DV and healthy relationship wheel, conflict resolution skills, Gottman's love map & four horsemen, perpetual vs. solvable problems and the assessment map.
- The traineeship provided very practical information that is highly transferable to work in the field.
- I never knew about relationship programs and classes. That was very valuable knowledge to have in the human services field.
- It was an invaluable opportunity. It helped to define my work with families.
- An enriching experience and a chance to analyze and study a topic that is not always looked at as closely (although it is a part of every human experience) in Social Work education.

The overall project was developed from the onset as an interdisciplinary venture. The Departments of Marriage and Family Therapy and Child and Family Studies as well as the School of Education were represented in the faculty team. When the trainees were asked how the interdisciplinary aspects of the traineeship impacted their experience they responded in a very positive manner making such comments as:

- It helped me to better understand the professional similarities and differences in other departments, which I have been able to utilize in my professional relationships.
- It provided another point of view and constructive dialogue.
- I strongly learned how other professional people think of the same issues in different ways.
- I loved the interdisciplinary aspects of the traineeship. It was great to have the different background and perspectives. I think that it added more to the traineeship.

When asked what suggestions or changes they would offer to make the traineeship more applicable to students interested in working within the child welfare system, students offered the following:

- Most of the child welfare work is with children and/or adolescents who could benefit from these skills also. More discussion on pre-marital and youth services was recommended.
- More discussion and information on co-parents not living together.
- Internships need to be more specific to the traineeship so that knowledge learned can be applied.
- Having speakers from the community, such as former trainees, who can present on how they have implemented this information into their work.
- One Child and Family Studies student felt that the wish they were given the opportunity to have an internship. An entry level or shadowing experience would have been useful and valuable.
- Several trainees recommended that more topics be include and either making it a two semester course or have it paired with other courses such as child welfare policy where healthy marriage, relationship and family formation information relevant to both courses is included.
- Now that there are more community agencies offering marriage/partnership training it would be helpful to do site visits.
- More information is needed on the child welfare system in general and the specifics of such things as food stamps and cash benefits, the pros and cons of cohabitating on your application and other hands-on applications.
- More information on how the worlds problems also affect family problems and on issues such as substance abuse, growing up in a single parent family, ensuring a child's safety, effects of childhood trauma on relationships, etc..

One student wrote: "I loved the teaching that I received there and learning from the social work and child and family studies students. I wouldn't change a thing.

Overwhelmingly 100% of the trainees recommended that this course be continued at the University level and 93% felt that it should also be conducted at the community level. Students offered such comments as:

*Thinking about marriage - the most basic unit in our society – is always important and has long term effects for children and society as a whole. So, incorporating this knowledge in any way we can is priceless.*

*People at the university level need such a course that focuses on practical application of knowledge.*

Finally, trainees were asked if there was anything else they would like to contribute.

*I am glad and grateful that I was able to be a part of this traineeship. I enjoyed the more in-depth exploration of the chosen topics rather than a simple "gloss-over" that so frequently occurs.*