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# Project SUCCESS: A Model for University-School-Community Partnerships

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## Project SUCCESS: A Model for University-School-Community Partnerships

In the 1980s a flurry of educational reform activity took place, resulting in collaborative relationships between public schools and universities as a popular and promising vehicle to revitalize education in urban areas (Osajima, 1989). The hope for these collaborations has been that the "bumping together of university and school cultures would have a positive effect on both institutions" (Goodlad, 1993, p. 25). Most of these partnerships have been between a school or department of education within a university and local elementary and secondary schools (Goodlad, 1990). Although the social work literature has addressed the subject of partnership programs (Danis, Franklin, & Schwab, 1993; Joseph, 1992), the programs described do not involve an ongoing relationship between schools or departments of social

work and school systems. This article describes a partnership between a department of social work in an urban university and the local public school system. The partnership also includes a nonprofit youth community services agency and area nursing homes.

The program, Project SUCCESS (Schools, Universities, Community, Committed to Excellence in Service and Scholastics), is a partnership among several diverse organizations: the University of Maryland Baltimore County Undergraduate Department of Social Work; the Baltimore City Public Schools; Magic Me, Inc., a nationally and internationally based nonprofit youth community services organization; and local area nursing homes. The program seeks to provide a comprehensive community service program both to Baltimore City public middle-school

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students who are considered at risk academically, socially, or economically and to college students.

The partnership, which has operated for four years, has provided a service opportunity for more than 1,000 students in middle schools by involving them in intensive, weekly service to elderly people in nursing homes, most of which are located in their own communities. Over 150 college students have also participated in the program.

The partnership is unique in that it combines the efforts and talents of several distinct organizations to provide this innovative program to at-risk youths and college students. The mission of the partnership is motivated by four core beliefs. The first belief is that early intervention from trained and committed individuals is necessary to help prevent destructive behavior, because these youths are often beyond effective intervention once they reach the high school level. The second belief is that college students can make a dramatic impact on their own lives and the lives of at-risk youths through a structured service learning experience. The third belief is that the problems facing the city of Baltimore and its youths can only be addressed by combining the efforts of many segments of the community. Finally, the partnership believes that community service, for adolescent as well as for college-age students, is a viable method for challenging young people to prove themselves as responsible citizens and for acknowledging that they deserve a significant place in society.

### **Community Service and Young People**

In recent years a great deal of attention has been directed toward examining those factors that complement the academic curriculum, that instill the requisite personal and social charac-

teristics in students, and that best prepare secondary school students to be effective and productive citizens. Many people have begun to point to community service as a method to engender those personal and social characteristics considered important for the nation's citizens.

Former Maryland State School Superintendent David W. Hornbeck stated, "Each student should participate in a structured experience of community service as a prerequisite to graduation. . . . A successful and productive adulthood is more than academic or job-related prowess. It must also embody a sense of responsibility beyond one's self" (Harrison, 1987, p. 10). (The state has a requirement that students engage in 75 hours of community service before graduation from high school.) The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) recommended that every middle school include youth service in its core instructional program.

Wynn et al. (1988) and the Children's Defense Fund (1989) suggested that the benefits of community service might be especially important in empowering adolescents in low-income communities. Typically, disadvantaged youths are thought of as recipients, not givers, of services. However, given the proper guidance, direction, and supervision, these young people can respond well to the responsibility of service and sense the value of their efforts. This individual commitment to contribute to the common good is at the core of citizenship (William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, 1988). To prepare youths for the 21st century, instructional programs will have to proceed with a vision that extends beyond basic education to include development of personal and social competencies that will prepare children to meet the obligation of today's and future societies.

**Community service, for adolescent as well as for college-age students, is a viable method for challenging young people to prove themselves.**

College students may also benefit from the service experience. They develop leadership skills while serving as valuable role models for the youths they work with, they are exposed to environments and populations that otherwise might remain foreign to them, they have an opportunity to develop a stronger sense of personal and social responsibility, and they are exposed to a service ethic that it is hoped will stay with them for a lifetime. These benefits are particularly important for today's college students, as many do not have any expectations of participating in the political life of the country, engaging in altruistic activities, or expressing concern for the interests of others (Danzig & Szanton, 1986; Serow & Dreyden, 1990).

### Role of the Schools

Under Project SUCCESS social workers, administrators, teachers, and counselors in the participating middle schools identify at-risk students for participation in the program. Approximately 20 to 25 students in each school are chosen every year. The definition of *at-risk* includes students who are considered to be lacking in self-esteem; students exhibiting attendance problems, behavioral problems, or both; and students who are having family difficulties.

Once selected the students are invited to a recruitment and orientation session where they are introduced to the program in a dramatic fashion. During this session students are bound with tape in paralytic positions, some are blindfolded, and others are given eyeglasses smeared with Vaseline so that they may experience and understand the needs of elderly people who are often trapped in bodies that are limited. The program is then explained to the students, and they are asked to volunteer for the program, which requires a weekly commitment from them

for at least one year, and if they so choose, up to three years. Students are told they have been recommended for the program because it is thought they might make good participants.

Because participation in the program is voluntary, any student may decline to participate or leave the program at any time once he or she has joined. Those who leave the program usually do so because they have moved and transferred to a school that does not have the program. Excluding those students the program has a retention rate of over 90 percent. Once students join the program the orientation phase begins. Over the course of four weeks issues such as what to expect, how to approach elderly people, and their fears and concerns about working with elderly people are addressed. Emphasis is placed on helping students learn to identify and honestly express their feelings. Students are also given an initial tour of the nursing home they will visit. After the specific rules of conduct for the different facilities are discussed and placed in each student's journal (students are required to make weekly entries about their experiences), they are considered ready for their visits. Students are given release time from school once a week to visit the nursing homes. Visits last for approximately one hour. In the nursing home each student is paired with an elderly partner. Each pair works together throughout the school year on different projects designed to foster a genuine and meaningful relationship. Projects range from assisting the elderly partner in making holiday gifts to sharing family histories and personal experiences. The students are encouraged to use their own creative talents to engage their partners, who often have not had regular visitations for many years. For example, in 1993 students organized a "Senior Prom" for the elderly residents in one of the nursing homes. This has been

turned into an annual event and now involves all of the schools and nursing homes that participate in the program.

Once a month students meet at the school with their group leaders for a "reflection" session. These sessions have two goals. The first goal is to reinforce positive experiences in the program and process negative ones. To accomplish this goal the program encourages the students to discuss their successes and challenges in befriending their partners. The group then provides feedback on ways to modify their service to best meet the needs of the clients. The second goal of the reflection sessions is to build social skills such as critical thinking, communication, trust, problem solving, and self-esteem. Through discussions, workshops, and role plays that are often related to their experiences in the nursing homes, students engage in activities that stress appropriate social skills. For example, a self-esteem exercise requires students to identify positive points about themselves, others in the group, and the group as a whole. For critical thinking students may be required to engage in activities that require group problem solving. The social skills that are emphasized change each year, and by the third and final year students are expected to gain an understanding of how others perceive them and are required to devise a plan to serve the community at large (Magic Me, Inc., 1991). The orientation, nursing home visits, and reflection sessions are conducted by a team composed of a Magic Me staff member, university student interns, and school staff.

### Role of the University

The University of Maryland Baltimore County, through its undergraduate Department of Social Work, provides student interns from various academic departments. To properly prepare these students for the experi-

ence, the project places emphasis on three crucial issues. First, student fears and misconceptions must be addressed. Students often feel a real sense of commitment and urgency to help those who are less fortunate. Just as often, however, they have never come in contact with the individuals, groups, organizations, or communities they most want to help. Some are attuned to their lack of knowledge, whereas others have never given the issue any thought. Some students are embarrassed to admit their innocence, whereas others blissfully believe their spirit will be all conquering (Bembry, 1992). To address this issue project staff use this as a topic of discussion in the student interview as well as in the initial program orientation.

The second issue is that students must be clear as to what their roles and responsibilities are. Often students are tempted to cross boundaries that are not appropriate in their desire to help. For example, interns begin to place themselves in a counseling role with a troubled student, or an intern feels a responsibility to become involved in a student's family relationship. To avoid these situations the initial orientation program provides a comprehensive description of the purpose of the program and an explanation of expectations and responsibilities, and interns are given relevant information about the population they will be working with.

The third issue is that students must be provided with ongoing training and supervision. To address the need for training, the university requires a mandatory three-credit seminar. This course provides a weekly structured learning experience throughout the semester. The course is offered through the Department of Social Work and is cotaught by a social work faculty member and staff members of the Magic Me program. The total time required of interns in the service experience averages

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about five hours weekly. For purposes of quality control, enrollment in the course is limited to 15 to 20 students each semester. Normally, no more than two interns are paired with a Magic Me staff member at the service site, and they assist in the supervision and oversight of 20 to 25 participants and their elderly partners. Although Magic Me has a detailed program curriculum, university students are given the freedom to plan and conduct their own nursing home activities and reflection sessions. These original projects are often included in the formal curriculum.

Traditionally, college students have had to seek out off-campus service projects on their own. When colleges and universities organize and coordinate these community action efforts, they not only assist in the student's personal development but also enhance the relationship between the college and the community.

#### **Role of Community Organizations**

Magic Me recruits middle schools and nursing homes and is responsible for coordination between them such as bus transportation and scheduling. Magic Me also provides the initial orientation session for middle-school and university students. Magic Me has developed a youth community services curriculum that forms the basis for nursing home activities and reflection sessions. Magic Me staff members serve as service site supervisors for the university interns and participate in the weekly intern class.

Magic Me was founded in Baltimore in 1980 and now has over 60 programs in the United States and two in Europe. Some of these programs have an affiliation with the original program, and others have permission to use the name. The Baltimore program, however, is the only one that has a formal relationship with a college or university.

The nursing homes identify residents, provide facilities, and provide a weekly time for visits. The nursing home activity directors also assist in planning appropriate activities for residents and youths.

#### **Conclusion**

Project SUCCESS is overseen by a faculty member in the Department of Social Work at the University of Maryland Baltimore County; an administrator with the Baltimore City Public Schools; and the executive director of Magic Me, Inc. Project SUCCESS operates in four of 27 middle schools and offers the most comprehensive community service experience for middle-school students in Baltimore.

In four years Project SUCCESS has served nearly 1,500 middle-school students and over 150 college students. The program has been able to enlarge the horizons of these participants through experience with people differing in social class, subculture, and age. For most young people opportunities for a broad range of experiences with people from backgrounds other than their own are often not available. Furthermore, these experiences have challenged them with a service opportunity that helps them establish an identity and gain a sense of self-respect and responsibility. It has also provided hours of meaningful activity and companionship to the elderly participants and improved their quality of life in the process. An evaluation of Magic Me conducted by the Department of Social Work at the University of Maryland Baltimore County has shown that the program does have a positive impact on the self-esteem and social responsibility of the middle-school participants (Bembry, 1994). Some comments from participants illustrate the effects of the program.

One elderly participant stated, "Working with Michael makes me feel

that I am helping someone. I hope I am. I was a teacher for many years and I like to help children. Michael and I have become good friends. He can tell me things that he won't tell anyone else. I am like a second mother to Michael. When the students come to the nursing home they bring joy."

One university intern stated, "The first time I truly felt what Magic Me was really about was when Vonetta, Billy, and I led the last visit to the nursing home. We came up with the idea of using an acronym for the promotion of open communication between the partners and wow, it actually worked. There were so many intimate feelings being shared between the partners and so much sharing of interests that were meaningful. Vonetta, Billy, and I just stood in awe of the whole situation."

One middle-school student wrote, "Our names are Brian and Kerri. We are eighth graders from Benjamin Franklin Middle School. When we first started Magic Me, we thought it would just be a chance to get out of school, but after visiting the nursing home our feelings changed. After our first visit, we knew the elderly enjoyed working with us. We know this because just before leaving, the residents would ask us, 'When are you coming back, and please don't leave.' That made us feel

we are accomplishing our goal, which is to learn to serve and serve to learn. That helped us gain self-confidence in getting to know different people. We know we will miss working with our partners, but we learned a lot with Magic Me."

Project SUCCESS has brought together the talents and resources of several institutions in a symbiotic relationship that meets the needs of all who participate. This is particularly important for the university and school segment of the partnership, because these institutions have not always worked together in productive, long-term, useful ways (Goodlad, 1993). Project SUCCESS stands as a model of cooperation among different institutions, working in concert to address the needs of diverse communities through emphasizing their kinship. ■

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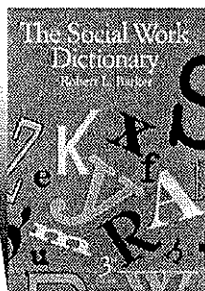
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