Promoting Leadership Learning in Clinical Field Education: The Urban Leadership Program at Simmons School of Social Work

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For the past fourteen years, Simmons School of Social Work students have had the opportunity to build leadership skills through participation in the Urban Leadership Certificate Program (ULP). The ULP is a unique initiative that aims to empower social workers as leaders who can promote change on a broader level while they are intervening to assist individuals, families, and groups. One major component of ULP instruction is the Urban Leadership Project, an assignment that requires students to develop and carry out a plan to address a service delivery obstacle in their Advanced Year clinical internship. The Urban Leadership Project provides students with a challenging and rich learning experience. Their leadership learning both parallels and enhances the development of more traditional clinical practice skills. This article will provide an overview of the ULP, describe the Project assignment, and discuss field educators' potential impact on students' leadership learning.

The Urban Leadership Program

The Urban Leadership Program in Clinical Social Work (ULP)[1] was developed in 1998 as the result of a partnership between Simmons School of Social Work and a group of urban agency leaders who were committed to developing social workers for leadership roles in urban communities. MSW students who graduate with a ULP Certificate are prepared to take on leadership roles in challenging, multicultural environments. The program aims to teach them a broad repertoire of leadership skills for advancing the needs of their clients, organizations, communities, and the profession.

We encourage the integration of clinical practice and leadership skill development for social work students; in addition to promoting excellence in clinical practice, students are offered experiences in the classroom and field that stimulate and support leadership learning and the development of individual leadership styles. The specialized curriculum is designed to give ULP students theoretical and practical grounding in leadership. In addition to the normal course requirements for a Simmons MSW, candidates take two leadership skills courses and complete four skills-based mini-courses. The field experience is designed to help students integrate some of their learning through a hands-on

project in the field during their Advanced Year placement. Additionally, students have opportunities for contact with community leaders who are willing to share their own leadership experiences.

Utilizing a theoretical framework developed by Ronald Heifetz of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, the ULP strives to prepare students for adaptive leadership in situations where problems are not clear-cut and technical solutions will not suffice (Heifetz, 1994). According to Heifetz and Linsky (2002), making progress in such complex situations requires leadership that incites learning, and that focuses on "changing attitudes, values, and behaviors" (p. 13). The synergy between what Heifetz teaches and clinical social work education is powerful: we believe that his ideas about how to promote change fundamentally involve the application of clinical intervention principles to leadership dilemmas.

According to Heifetz and Linsky (2002), leadership is a moral activity: a leader is someone who takes initiative and risks around a perceived need to improve a situation, an organization, or a community. Leadership is not a personal characteristic or attribute, nor is it restricted to someone who occupies a position of formal authority. Leadership is an activity of which individuals can move in and out, and one that can be initiated from any position within a given setting. According to Heifetz and Linsky, leadership "requires the capacity to keep asking basic questions of yourself and of the people in your organization and community" (p. 234).

We encourage students to practice leadership in clinical settings that are diverse — multilingual and/ or multicultural — preferably in an urban environment (in our case, Boston). It is critical for students to learn to move comfortably within complex environments and to be able to think critically about the agency setting: does the agency address the challenges and make use of the opportunities that are present within a diverse community?

The Urban Leadership Project Assignment

The ULP[2] promotes development of leadership skills through the Urban Leadership Project, an opportunity for students to apply classroom leadership learning to practice in their Advanced Year clinical field placements. While all Simmons social work students are gaining experience with assessment and diagnosis and with developing appropriate clinical interventions, ULP students are also able to gain valuable experience with identifying, describing, and analyzing problems, with formulating realistic goals, and with planning and implementing effective interventions on a larger systems level. The practical application of their classroom learning about leadership theory and skills parallels their experience with learning about clinical intervention.

The project assignment requires students to identify a compelling "larger systems" obstacle to service delivery at their placement agency, to analyze all of the factors contributing to the problem, to develop appropriate intervention plans, and to take leadership for facilitating change which benefits

the agency and the community it serves. The goals of the assignment are to: 1) provide students with an opportunity to integrate leadership learning into clinical practice; 2) enable students to develop leadership skills; 3) help students to assess their own skills as leaders, and to identify areas needing further development; and, 4) support leadership learning and activity by exposing students to agency leaders who share their own experiences of leadership. With careful planning, the Urban Leadership Project makes a valuable contribution to the work of students' placement agencies.

ULP students select a focus for their projects during the first semester of the Advanced Year. The Foundation Year leadership course, a summer reading assignment, and a Project Development workshop series during the fall of their Advanced Year help them prepare for this process. They use their clinical skills to assess agency needs and to identify a problem that defies technical, clear-cut solutions. In order to identify this obstacle to service delivery, students utilize input from a variety of agency stakeholders, including administrators, staff, clients, and collaterals, meeting with them to hear their perspectives and to explore the history of the problem. Students assess the impact of the problem on clients as well as its personal, cultural, and institutional causes (Belkin- Martinez, 2004). Stakeholders regularly differ in their perception of the problem and how to solve it, creating an adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 1994).

Development of the project focus involves a process of negotiation between student, supervisor, agency administration, field advisor, and the ULP faculty. This process begins during the initial field placement interview and involves ongoing discussion of the agency's needs during students' first weeks of placement. Similar to the process of developing treatment plans for clients, students invest significant time and energy in completing the assessment process, propose an action plan to address the larger systems problem, anticipate roadblocks that they may encounter, and set measurable goals for evaluation of their interventions. During the development phase of students' project work, they prepare a written proposal that serves as a map for carrying out their plans. A project consultant who is part of the ULP faculty guides students in this process. Field instructors are invited to attend a workshop designed to assist them in supporting students' efforts.

Students pursue many different types of leadership activities to fulfill the requirements of this as-signment, including but not limited to conducting needs assessments, developing policies and pro-cedures, creating programs and curriculum, writing manuals, marketing, fundraising, community liaison work, political advocacy, organizing focus groups, making presentations, and program evalu-ation. The Urban Leadership Project is carried out during the second semester of the Advanced Year, in conjunction with students' enrollment in the Leadership in Action for Social Work Practice course. The assignment culminates in the preparation of a final summary and in a presentation of their work during a Project Showcase, which is held each spring at Simmons College and to which students' supervisors and the School of Social Work community are invited.

The Urban Leadership Project provides an opportunity for leadership learning, whether it succeeds or fails in achieving intended goals. All students learn about the change process, as well as about themselves as change agents. Many projects require mid-course shifts in direction, as students will encounter roadblocks that they did not anticipate. In fact, students rarely accomplish the goals that they originally propose. Due to the challenging nature of this assignment, students are encouraged to make use of their field supervisors, agency administrators, advisors, and ULP faculty to support their project work. Tackling a leadership challenge is in many ways similar to intervening with individual clients: it takes a great deal of clinical skill and effort to assess the underlying issues, to develop realistic goals and plans for intervention, to work with resistance to change, and to measure progress towards achieving goals.

The Role of the FIeld Educator

Field instructors for ULP students are encouraged to make students' larger systems change efforts a regular focus for supervision, along with their casework. In the most recent Heifetz book on adaptive leadership (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009), the authors posit that effective intervention requires leaders to "get on the balcony" (p. 7) to achieve the distance needed to objectively understand the situation and their role in it; students will benefit from supervision that fosters insight and analysis. How are they demonstrating leadership? What roadblocks are they encountering and what are they doing to overcome them? Are their interventions effective? Where are they getting frustrated? How are they integrating theory into their practice of leadership? Are they doing what they originally proposed, or have they had to shift direction? This kind of ongoing reflection helps students maximize what they learn about themselves as leaders and change agents.

The skills that field educators are helping future clinicians to build can also help their interns become effective leaders. The Urban Leadership Project provides the opportunity to practice skills in:
1.   Conducting an organizational assessment to build an understanding of the context for change;
2.   Problem identification;
      • Assessing the impact of service delivery obstacles on clients;
      • Assessing the differing perspectives of stakeholders regarding the nature of the problem;
      • Assessing the history of the problem;
      • Analyzing the personal, cultural, and institutional factors that contribute to the problem (Belkin-Martinez, 2004);
3.   Setting goals: what is possible and realistic to accomplish;
4.   Developing intervention plans;
      • Determining how to use oneself differentially to tackle the problem;
      • Anticipating obstacles to one's leadership and building strategies to address them;
5.   Carrying out an intervention plan;

- Applying a range of intervention strategies and techniques to maintain focus on the problem, develop alliances, address resistance, help stakeholders cope with loss, and promote positive change;
- Observing the impact of the change effort and adjusting plans as needed to reach desired goals;
- Empowering others to take responsibility for change;

6.   Evaluating outcomes;
- Establishing measures for the success of the intervention;
- Assessing one's effectiveness as a leader.

Case Example

The following case example, drawn from the experience of a recent ULP graduate, will highlight the nature of the Urban Leadership Project and the role of the field educator in supporting it.[3]

Dennis was placed in a small, urban counseling center, founded ten years earlier as a church-based ministry. It had originally been funded through a large donation, and over the years had developed partnerships with other programs to expand its services and bring in additional revenue. During the beginning phase of his placement, Dennis developed his understanding of the organization through many conversations with staff and administration. Dennis learned about the organization's mission to provide financially accessible, quality mental health care to youth and adults, and its history, both programmatic and funding. He learned that the counseling center had recently come under the auspices of a larger foundation that governs other church outreach programs, mostly directed toward youth. This partnership was essential to the counseling center's financial sustainability.

Similar to other ULP students, Dennis struggled to define a focus for his leadership project. He and his supervisor, Ned, engaged in a lot of brainstorming, while also focusing on Dennis' beginning caseload. Ned reports that the discussion of a possible focus started out very broad, "trying to change the world," but eventually narrowed toward discussion of the relationship between the counseling center and the parent foundation, and what Dennis could realistically tackle within the scope of his internship. Dennis appreciated the leeway that his supervisor gave him during the development phase of the project work: "He allowed me to make my own assessment and take actions based on that, rather than his own agenda."   His supervisor facilitated his making contact with key stakeholders who could help him deepen his assessment.

Dennis zeroed in on the lack of understanding of the counseling center's work by the foundation's board, which now governs its functioning. He discovered an adaptive challenge in the absence of processes and procedures for documenting counseling center practices and measuring its outcomes; such formal processes and procedures did not appear to be part of the center's culture. Both the counseling center and foundation leadership saw this issue as an obstacle to the viability of the coun-

seling program, while some clinicians felt that trying to describe or measure the work they did would undermine their ability to carry out the center's mission as they understood it.

As Dennis continued his assessment, he learned that there had been previous attempts to introduce evaluative practices, but these efforts had failed to take root. Dennis discerned that such practices had been imposed on staff; clinicians did not have the level of input that would allow them to feel that their values had been incorporated in the development of a feedback mechanism. Applying his classroom leadership learning to the adaptive challenge, Dennis sought to engage counseling center staff in discussion of their concerns about evaluative practices and in the creation of a tool that they would experience as helpful and relevant to their work. Dennis' supervisor, Ned, facilitated the arrangement of meetings with staff and helped Dennis process the input he obtained. Ned saw his role as helping Dennis feel empowered, as Dennis was trying to empower staff to respond adaptively to the challenge at hand.

Ned experienced a synergy between his supervision of Dennis' casework and his supervision of Dennis' leadership efforts. "Early on, Dennis defaulted to me—he wanted me to tell him where to go with both his clients and his work with the staff. I would tell him, 'You gotta get in there!' He needed my encouragement to take the initiative with both his clients and his leadership project, to find his voice and be willing to take risks with his use of self."

Dennis' original goals for the project shifted as he encountered roadblocks. It was difficult to carve out adequate time for discussion with staff. Dennis also discovered that there were more fundamental issues that needed to be addressed to move the discussion forward, such as defining goals for the counseling center in relation to the overall mission and vision for the foundation. Given the limited context of his eight-month internship, he had to narrow the focus of his project to developing a pilot evaluation practice: creating and implementing a client satisfaction survey that reflected the priorities of the counseling center. Dennis was able to accomplish this goal, as well as to stimulate healthy dialogue among stakeholders about the center's identity and accountability.

Dennis learned a great deal from carrying out his Urban Leadership Project, although the goal of implementing ongoing evaluative practices at the counseling center was not realized to the degree that he originally proposed. Dennis was able to rely on his status as an intern to gather information and question the status quo in a non-threatening way, and to direct attention to the identified challenge; he learned that he could take leadership of a change effort without having any formal authority. He understood the importance of engaging multiple stakeholders to develop a comprehensive assessment of a problem and to build an intervention plan. Finally, he recognized the need to maintain enough distance to anticipate roadblocks and address them as they emerge. Dennis felt that his supervisor's involvement was critical to his learning: "Ned's enthusiasm about the project, his belief in me, and his candidness to reflect on his own leadership style is what propelled my own project to its

completion and helped me define myself as a leader."

When Dennis reflected on his leadership experience in his final summary, he wondered about the lasting impact of his efforts to promote adaptive change: would the seeds he planted continue to germinate? Most ULP students have similar concerns about whether their leadership efforts make a difference, as clinical interns wonder about their lasting impact on their clients. Dennis' efforts had a meaningful impact on his supervisor, who appreciated having had the opportunity to think about how to bring attention to an issue, engage others in creating a vision of what is possible, and empower them to be involved in decision-making.[4]

Conclusion

Field instructors for ULP students generally have not had any formal leadership training, and may question their ability to support supervisees' leadership learning. In fact, clinical supervisors are already armed with the knowledge and skills that they need to enhance students' learning of leadership principles, as well as to be effective leaders themselves. We hope that field educators feel more empowered to take on leadership roles as a result of their supervisory experience with ULP students.

As described above, the ULP emphasizes that students can become effective leaders by applying clinical intervention principles and skills to promote systemic change. Through the Urban Leadership Project assignment, students have the opportunity to deepen their assessment skills. They learn that comprehensive assessment of an organization and the obstacles that get in the way of service delivery are critical to understanding how one might intervene to promote change. The project gives students practice with setting realistic goals and developing an intervention plan to address larger systems issues. Students also figure out how to apply their clinical understanding to set goals and intervene with clients. The effectiveness of their efforts to promote change will certainly be contingent on their ability to establish positive alliances with clients and collaterals to treatment on the micro-level, as well as with agency stakeholders on the larger systems level.   In all cases, students must learn to sit with individuals' powerful reactions to loss and change and work through resistance. While they will likely make a positive difference, it may be difficult for students to measure the impact of their efforts, and progress will likely be much slower and their impact much smaller than they might have imagined.

ULP students experience a great deal of anxiety about their project work. They are understandably concerned about taking the lead to challenge the attitudes, values, and behaviors that maintain the status quo in the delivery of services at their placement agencies. They feel vulnerable as student interns, and are worried about falling on their swords. Supervisors have a critical role in containing students' anxiety by actively listening to their concerns, supporting objective analysis, modeling professional distance, and teaching them about the limits of their role as change agent. By helping supervisees find sustenance for their journey to become effective clinicians and leaders, field educators are

making an invaluable contribution to the ULP, to placement agencies, and to the social work profession.

References

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[1] Much of the information in this section is reproduced from the ULP Handbook. The author of this article is an adjunct member of the ULP faculty and has been involved in writing and editing the handbook, which is revised on an annual basis.

[2] Much of the information in this section is reproduced from the ULP Handbook. The author has been working with Advanced Year ULP students since 2004 to help them develop their leadership projects.

[3] The names of the ULP student and his supervisor have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

[4] The development and implementation of evaluative practices is an ongoing focus at the counseling center, where the seeds that Dennis planted during his internship have grown roots!