

Implementing a Practitioner-Scholar Model at a University Counseling Center **Sharon Mitchell, Ph.D. and Andrea K. Greenwood, Ph.D.** **SUNY-Buffalo**

The University at Buffalo Counseling Services (UBCS) espouses a practitioner-scholar model whereby clinical practice is informed by scholarly inquiry. Embedded in the practitioner-scholar model is the belief that professional identity is not a static phenomenon that ends once a terminal degree or appropriate licensure or certification is achieved but instead consists of life-long learning that evolves as the field does. The goal is to develop research, critical thinking, conceptualization, problem-solving, and other scientific skills that are particularly pertinent to clinical practice. There are a variety of activities we view as vital in implementing this philosophy, including integration of professional literature, engaging in research in a variety of ways, and using the scientific method in clinical thinking. We share some of our specific activities here to encourage other centers to consider the potential benefits of the practitioner-scholar model to your staff, clients, and campus community.

UBCS displays a strong commitment to research in several ways including the existence of an internal research committee, biweekly or monthly activities that engage the entire staff in reading and evaluating research that is relevant to our student population, and more informal research trivia contests. The research committee is comprised of both senior staff and a psychology intern representative. It is charged with the tasks of evaluating external and internal research requests, initiating internal research projects, offering consultation to other staff members engaged in research, and arranging for continuing education to staff on research methods. One brainchild of the research committee was a monthly "Journal Club" where a selected piece of research that has been identified as a topic of interest is discussed over a lunch hour. Another activity borne out of this committee is a biweekly informal research trivia contest (3-5 multiple choice questions) that has been a fun way to expose staff and all levels of trainees, to interesting pieces of research and to encourage the development of curiosity about the integration of scholarly work with our clinical practice.

The membership of the Committee for Counseling and Psychological Services (CCAPS) engaged in a number of discussions at the most recent ACPA convention in Nashville about how our programming could better meet the needs and interests of our constituents, and overwhelmingly, members indicated that empirically based programs are highly valued as they lend scholarly credibility and foster engagement in critical thinking about our work. UBCS staff members actively conduct research, especially that which applies to our specific campus populations. Utilization and critical evaluation of the data we collect by virtue of our clinical practice allows us to have a richer and more meaningful picture of the needs of our campus. For example, a recent piece of research examined the utilization of counseling services by international students compared with American students. Not only did we clarify our understanding of how these students compare with regard to actual utilization (versus relying on previous research which largely addresses attitudes toward seeking counseling), we gained a clearer understanding of some of the needs of these students. This aids not only in our clinical work, but also provides us with exceptional data to use with other campus stakeholders in order to better advocate for the developmental and psychological needs of our international student population. (See web link to CCAPS programs presented in Nashville, TN for more on this study.) An upcoming research project will involve examining our crisis response and outcomes of hospital referrals to provide information about how we as a staff make decisions and the efficacy of those decisions.

Specifically with regard to training, UBCS provides predoctoral psychology interns as well as other trainees in psychology, counseling and social work graduate programs, with professional literature and resources which are integrated into both supervision and seminars which parallel the trainees' clinical activities. Encouraging critical evaluation of the research and theoretical literature in this way supports

trainees' growing ability to use the scientific method in clinical thinking, including developing awareness of bias, hypothesis testing, and evaluation. Furthermore, predoctoral psychology interns are given professional development time to make progress on their own research, whether that is working toward dissertation completion or other research projects.

In addition to the seminars associated with the training programs at UCBS, there is a monthly professional development seminar that is open to all staff and trainees. All facilitators are asked to provide a list of references including empirical research that is relevant to their presentation. Staff interests and needs influence the topics for the seminars. Staff input was also key in building our staff library. The staff was asked to provide a list of books that they felt were essential to have on hand. Due to this input, the library consists of resources for counseling professionals, self-help books, and scholarly journals related to counseling and college student development. Staff and trainees have access to the library but books cannot be loaned directly to students. Finally, staff is expected and encouraged to participate in professional organizations at the local, regional, and national levels as this keeps them abreast of current trends and innovations. It also allows them to truly experience and model the practitioner-scholar philosophy. To aid in this endeavor, each staff member is allotted professional development money and "earns" additional travel money, if he or she makes a presentation or serves in a leadership role at a conference or professional meeting.

Each campus faces unique challenges in implementing a practitioner-scholar model. School and staff size, monetary resources, and interest are some of the obstacles to address. For example, an internal research committee might not be possible at a small center but a Division of Student Affairs research committee might work. Many of the initiatives described above involve no financial cost and minimal time investment. Others such as travel money may be cost-prohibitive for some centers. Some are wildly popular and fun and others have been less well received. It is our hope that sharing some ideas about implementing a practitioner-scholar model in counseling centers will engage you in thinking more about how you can implement big or small changes in your work that allow for integration of both science and practice.