FAITH INTEGRATION IN MSW CAPSTONE LEADERSHIP CURRICULUM AND EXAMPLES OF STUDENT PROJECTS

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Faith Integration in MSW Capstone Leadership Curriculum and Examples of Student Projects

In response to calls for greater social work representation in senior leadership positions involving social welfare policy and practice (Patti, 2003; Perlmutter, 2006; Rank & Hutchison, 2000), social work programs are increasingly focusing on leadership in academic courses and field learning (Mertz, Fortune & Zendell, 2007; Rogge & Rocha, 2004). Recent literature has emphasized the importance of leadership to social work, especially in areas such as health care where changing policies and practice expectations are dramatically affecting professional roles (Lichty, 2011; Fisher, 2009; Holosko, 2009).

Social work leadership courses provide unique opportunities to address numerous dimensions of social need and change potential at multiple systems levels. This paper describes the capstone leadership curriculum used in an MSW program at a Christian university, examples of student projects, and faith considerations in course content and leadership preparation. Student learning outcomes were developed following a literature review exploring leadership needs in professional social work. The curriculum was designed to facilitate student self-awareness, familiarity with leadership models and theories, decision making capacities congruent with professional ethics, and development of leadership skills and qualities relevant across social work contexts. Required readings for the course included *Leading for a lifetime: How defining moments shape the leaders of today and tomorrow* (Bennis & Thomas, 2007); *Leadership for a better world: Understanding the social change model of leadership development* (Komives & Wagner, 2009); *Strengths-based leadership: Great leaders, teams, and why people follow* (Rath & Conchie, 2008); and, *Judgment: How winning leaders make great calls* (Tichy & Bennis, 2007). A major focus is placed on sustainability, and students are expected to engage in documentation and collaboration in such a way that agencies can continue project activity following student graduation. The faith integration component of the course includes readings from Bibles with leadership orientations (Buzzell, Boa & Perkins, 2000; Maxwell, 2007) and extensive student reflection on concepts such as spiritual gifts, mentoring, and the role of faith in challenging leadership circumstances. Written assignments are used to explore these topics along with regular accountability group meetings in which 5-7 students are matched according to project similarity. Class sessions meet for 3-hour blocks once a month and include time for accountability groups, lecture, lecture discussion, and individual project consultation

MSW students enroll in the capstone course during their final semester in conjunction with their concentration-level field placement. They are encouraged to pursue projects that reflect their future professional interests, and work with field instructors to assure that projects also meet agency needs and/or the interests of client groups. In prior social work courses students have completed their strengths profiles (Rath & Conchie, 2008) and written reflection papers

on faith integration resources such as *Let your life speak* (Palmer, 1999) and *Life of the Beloved* (Nouwen, 2002). Students are also asked to reflect on the concept of calling as articulated by Gordon Smith (1999) in his book *Courage and Calling*, and to develop a project congruent with their personal and professional callings.

MSW capstone leadership projects have been completed in the following categories. Though not exhaustive, this list identifies frequent areas of focus with strong potential for success.

Support groups – Support groups have included shared experiences for single mothers transitioning from homelessness, teen parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, and parents of infants in a hospital neonatal intensive care unit. The main predictor of support group success has been ascertaining that there will be an adequate number of participants and appropriate agency support. For example, after a student created a resilience-focused teen parent support group and related psycho-educational curriculum, she learned that the Catholic agency where she interned was reluctant to offer a group for teen parents. Though in a high-need, culturally diverse community, the student encountered considerable challenge locating an appropriate meeting place. She was able to share her curriculum with a few girls individually, but the actual group did not begin until after graduation when the student became a full-time employee of the field agency.

Travel – Travel projects included the organization of a trip to the California-Mexico border with development of a resource guide focused on immigration and economic issues and another wilderness overnight retreat for families residing at a transition shelter. For the latter project the MSW student was able to partner with the Outward Bound program to offer some team-building and self-reliance activities for adults and youth, many of whom had never spent extensive time in nature. A student interning at a group home for foster youth coordinated a snowboarding trip and created a curriculum that applied snowboarding lesson principles with themes of daily life including balance, safety, supporting others, perseverance, and trust.

Community advocacy – Community advocacy projects have included coordination of multi-campus student participation in a policy summit focused on advocacy for Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA) populations, creation of a sustainable structure for ongoing APU MSW program participation in the Lobby Days event organized by the CA chapter of NASW in Sacramento, and organization of fresh produce donations to a women's shelter in downtown Los Angeles.

Public education events – A number of students have offered one-time or multiple day public education events. Topics have included adolescent suicide prevention, HIV/AIDS education, immigration policy, and understanding mental illness. One student created a public awareness

stroller walk (half-day) to raise attention to post-partum depression and other perinatal mental health issues.

Skill-based or psychoeducational groups – Examples have included an English-language practice group for high school students, anger and mood management groups, parent education groups, a GED preparation group, and a group for family members of patients of an inpatient psychiatric facility.

Administration – Administrative projects have focused on program evaluation, defining program services and quantifying outcomes, program development for a high school seeking to improve truancy prevention efforts, coordination of student counseling for an alternative high school experiencing a geographic move and change in staffing patterns, and others focused on grant writing, enhancing agency communication, and improving coordination among agencies serving similar client groups.

Creative Arts - A number of students have been interested in integrating creative arts activities in field settings, including music, dance, and visual images.   Such projects are typically most successful if students are able to frame their interests in the context of scholarship and their own professional training. Examples have included a drumming group for adults with chronic and severe mental illness, a music memory group for aging adults with Alzheimer's disease, a dance-based after school program for girls that also emphasized body image and exercise, and an art therapy training program for hospital social workers on a pediatric unit.

Technology – Several projects have focused on creating/improving agency websites, translating website content to Spanish, using technology to raise awareness of community resources, and creating YouTube or other kinds of videos to provide educational information or social support.

Self-care – Three students have undertaken self-care projects focused on meeting the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of agency staff members. Examples of activities included the donation of massage therapy services, securing a small grant to get a fountain installed in the agency's staff room, getting food donations with related curriculum on healthy eating, and creating a blog with helpful self-care information and inspirational messages.

Similar challenges have surfaced each year the course has been offered. A summary of these issues is provided below with discussion of ways they have been addressed.

Among the greatest challenges posed by the course include student autonomy in project selection and the developmental process of recognizing distinctions between leadership and management. For Christian students, the desire to strongly integrate faith in leadership projects may be compromised by expectations of secular agencies. Pervasive ambiguity surrounding the professional identity of social work, especially in multidisciplinary settings, has

also challenged project completion. In these situations, students have been encouraged to journal about their experiences and assess their own levels of confidence and comfort sharing information about social work with colleagues. In one situation, a student with a strong interest in HIV/AIDS prevention was discouraged from organizing a public health fair at his internship site, and later had meetings with several board members to share social work concerns about health care resources available to marginalized groups. Following graduation this student was employed by a large HIV/AIDS service agency in New York City.

Students may also struggle with professional identification as a leader as well as a social worker, and confidence to choose a project that reflects their own interests and future goals rather than the immediate needs of their agency. A number of students have been asked to develop projects focused on program evaluation and fundraising. Though appropriate if congruent with student interests, many times such projects become frustrating to students and field instructors. Students are encouraged at the time of proposal development to select a project about which they feel personally passionate, and are required to describe their reasons for choosing their projects in the formal proposal due in December. If a project does not seem to fit what is known about the interests of the student, then the proposal is returned with the request for another idea. The faculty member facilitating the course will often also call the field instructor to consult about appropriate student projects.

As with any project or work activity, life happens and project completion does not occur in the way the student had hoped. In one situation, a fundraising dinner a student had spent several months planning was cancelled because two members of a board member's family were killed in a plane crash three weeks before the event and the agency director decided it would be best to wait a few months before re-scheduling. In another situation, poor communication between the student's field instructor and the agency executive director caused an event to be cancelled since the director was not sure it was compatible with agency mission. A common scenario has been the lack of available participants for support and psycho-educational groups. In these situations the student's curriculum and planning notes have provided documentation of project efforts, though students were expected to be in close contact with their field instructors and faculty member to make sure all possible participant recruitment efforts were made.

Despite these challenges, the capstone leadership course has been a tremendous success and the poster session in which students display and discuss their projects with community members has been a highlight of their program experience. Positive feedback from university administrators has contributed to strong levels of support for the program and been useful in student recruitment and awareness of contributions made by MSW students to the community.

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AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

SOCW 541: CAPSTONE LEADERSHIP PROJECT

3 Units   Spring 2011

*Classes will meet the 1st and 3rd Thursdays of the month EXCEPT April due to spring break schedule

University Mission Statement: Azusa Pacific University is an evangelical Christian community of disciples and scholars who seek to advance the work of God in the world through academic excellence in liberal arts and professional programs in higher education that encourage students to develop a Christian perspective of truth and life.

MSW Mission Statement: The MSW Program in the Department of Social Work at Azusa Pacific University seeks to develop competent advanced social work practitioners who can integrate the knowledge, values, and skills of social work to advance social justice and provide services to assist individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Grounded in the profession's Code of Ethics and sensitivity to diversity, the MSW Program is committed to excellence in our teaching and scholarship, the integration of faith and learning, the development of professional leadership, and the strengthening of communities in local, national, and international contexts.

Course Description: This course will combine lecture and seminar formats to prepare students for professional leadership roles in human services and assist completion of capstone leadership projects. The content will include professional ethics and skills related to transformative leadership, administration, management, organization, and supervision. Leadership issues in secular and religious organizations will be explored. Prerequisites: *All foundation courses and completion of first semester of concentration courses.*

Student Learning Outcomes: (*Each measurable learning outcome is followed by assignment or activity used to assess learning outcome*)

Upon successful completion of this course, class participants will be able to:

1. Describe the relevance of diversity and professional ethics and values to the leadership of human service organizations, including potential responses to organizational bias and discrimination. (shared concentration objectives 1, 4)
   Activities/assignment: discussion/exam questions, capstone leadership project

2. Understand and demonstrate leadership skills in the areas of organizational communication, project development, and project completion. (shared concentration objectives 1, 3)
   Activities/assignment: capstone leadership project

3. Describe possible distinctions between professional and religiously-based leadership roles, ethics, and values in human service organizations and the relationship of leadership to organizational culture. (shared concentration objectives 4, 5, 6)
   Activities/assignment: discussion/exam questions

4. Engage in critical analysis of effective leadership roles and skills related to supervision, management, organization, administration, and the advancement of social and economic justice. (shared concentration objectives 1, 5, 7)
   Activities/assignment: discussion/exam questions

5. Demonstrate self-awareness of ways one's own values, beliefs, and cultural background may influence professional leadership style, organizational relationships, and activities. (shared concentration objectives 4, 6, 7)
   Activities/assignment: capstone leadership project, practice portfolio

6. Understand and describe synthesis of MSW Program learning and preparation for practitioner activities involving leadership, supervision, and ongoing professional development. (shared concentration objectives 1, 6, 7)
   Activities/assignment: capstone leadership project, practice portfolio

Required books:

Bennis, W.G. & Thomas, R.J. (2007). *Leading for a lifetime: How defining moments shape the leaders of today and tomorrow*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Komives, S.R. & Wagner, W. (2009). *Leadership for a better world: Understanding the social change model of leadership development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rath, T. & Conchie, B. (2008). *Strengths-based leadership: Great leaders, teams, and why people follow*. Omaha: Gallup Press.

Tichy, N. M. & Bennis, W.G. (2007). *Judgment: How winning leaders make great calls*. New York: Penguin Group.

Course Topics:

1. Professional ethics and social responsibilities in human service organizations
2. Leadership and issues of human diversity; demonstration of self-awareness regarding personal values, cultural identity, and community affiliations, responding to issues of organizational bias and discrimination
3. Leadership in professional and religiously-based human service programs; empirically based research relevant to leadership, typologies of religiously based programs, potential variance between professional and religious leadership values
4. Intersections of social service and business ethics and leadership
5. Qualities of successful organizations and their leaders; integrating micro- and macro-level theoretical and practice approaches in leadership functions
6. Leadership paradigms and characteristics of transformational leadership
7. Uses and abuses of power in leadership positions

8. Leadership, communication, and decision-making processes
9. Leadership, supervision, and organizational skills
10. Leadership, management, and administration
11. Leadership and the development of organizational culture
12. Leadership and strategies to advance social and economic justice
13. Consultations and presentations regarding capstone leadership projects (three sessions)

Evaluation/Assessment Rationale for Grade Determination:

Take-home exam: 10%

Practice portfolio   15%

Capstone process (group log & class participation)   30%

Capstone leadership project: 30%

Poster presentation of leadership project: 15%

CLASS FORMAT

This course is organized in a work group/seminar format. Attendance and participation are required. At the first session students will be assigned to accountability groups to provide support and accountability related to project timeliness and completion. Groups will be required to submit documentation of member progress after each class session. Though groups are not required to meet between sessions, electronic and/or personal contact is **highly encouraged**. Group members will provide each other with feedback toward the end of the course, and such feedback will be considered in progress grades. Capstone progress (30% of grade) includes class attendance, seminar participation (speaking, listening, evidence of having completed readings), effective action and decision making related to project completion, collegial support, and appropriate uses of feedback and supervision. Class time will be structured as follows:

9:00-9:45: Accountability group meetings; professor will check in with each group. E-mail or leave note regarding the location if you won't be in the classroom.

9:50-11:10: Seminar-style discussions of readings and their applications to capstone projects and professional social work; may include large and small group discussions.

11:15-11:45: Large group discussions of project challenges, job searches, other topics.

Assignment Description: Capstone Leadership Project

The Capstone Leadership Project provides opportunities for students to practice leadership at their field placement sites and enhance self-awareness of individual leadership styles and skills. The project requires students, in conjunction with their field instructors, to identify an existing need at their field agency, develop appropriate communication and intervention strategies to address the need, and

assume significant leadership for addressing and/or meeting the need. Goals of the assignment include: 1) opportunities for students to practice leadership in clinical and community practice settings; 2) opportunities for student self-reflection on existing leadership strengths and areas for improvement; and, 3) encouragement of student relationships with agency and/or community leaders intended to produce meaningful change. It is anticipated that the capstone leadership project will make a valuable contribution to the field site and demonstrate professional social work ethics, values, and responsiveness to diverse and at-risk populations. Project development will involve communication between the student, field instructor, agency administrator(s), MSW Field Director, and the course instructor.

Project planning should begin during the initial weeks of the practicum with written plans completed by the end of fall semester (outline to be distributed in October; plans due in December). Feedback regarding written plans will be provided the first week of spring semester, and students will be expected to submit a final project proposal integrating instructor feedback by the third week of the semester. Written plans should include a clear description of the project, anticipated timeline, articulation of workable steps toward project completion, anticipation of obstacles and resources, reflection on the compatibility of the project with professional ethics and values, and plans for project sustainability following student graduation. The Capstone Leadership course will meet twice monthly and focus on progress toward project completion with discussions of interdisciplinary readings relevant to leadership and integration of MSW academic and field content. During weeks the class is not meeting, students will be expected to arrange individual meetings with the instructor or others whose feedback is necessary for project completion, or to engage in other project-related activities. Potential projects may include fundraising and/or marketing activities, development of innovative intervention strategies, designing/leading training sessions for staff development (at least eight hours), community liaison work, needs assessments, research monographs (consult re. IRB) and related dissemination, creation or improvement of agency communication venues (newsletters, blogs), enhanced uses of technology, and political advocacy intended to benefit populations served by the agency. Projects may require additional time beyond coursework and field placement expectations. Students will be expected to submit a project report detailing the activities, agency/community collaborations, and outcomes associated with their projects, including self-reflection on areas of existing strength and need for improvement. Collaborative capstone projects will be strongly discouraged since course goals focus on individual leadership development and skill attainment. In highly exceptional circumstances involving large-scale projects, potential collaborations will require the development of individual contracts related to project completion and the written approval of the field and course instructors and the MSW Field Director.

Classroom Sessions

January 20: Course introduction and related opportunities for publication/presentation

- Application of professional ethics and responsibilities to leadership
- Integrating micro- and macro-level theoretical and practice approaches in leadership functions
- Possible roles of faith and calling in leadership development

February 3:

- Strengths-based leadership; drawing on strengths of individual team members
- Qualities of successful organizations and their leaders
- Leadership and the development of organizational culture
- Relevance of generational differences to social work leadership

Reading:

Strengths-based Leadership – Introduction through p. 95 (& relevant additional resources)

Leading for a Lifetime – parts 1-3 (pp. 1-85)

February 17:

- Leadership and social justice
- Social change model of leadership development
- Issues of human diversity, oppression and discrimination

Reading:

Leadership for a Better World -part 1 (pp. 2-143)

March 3:

- Values, beliefs, and leadership
- Possible ideological and practical distinctions between secular and religiously based organizations
- Becoming a change agent
- Leadership paradigms and characteristics of transformational leadership

Reading:

Leadership for a Better World -part 2 (pp.144-446)

March 17:

- Leadership challenges
- Intersections of social service and business ethics and leadership
- Critical analysis of effective leadership roles and skills
- Leadership judgment and people judgment

Reading:

Judgment – pp. 1-126

April 7:

- Strategy and crisis judgments
- Uses and abuses of power in leadership positions
- Leadership, communication, and decision-making processes

Reading: *Judgment* – pp. 127-284

April 14: 1-2:30 optional consultation re: poster presentations (off week)

April 28: Poster presentations, Wilden Atrium (students only 9:00-9:30; open to community 9:30-12:00)

May 5:

- Crucibles of leadership
- Alchemy and passion in leadership
- Future leadership directions
- Group/class closure

Reading:

Leading for a Lifetime – parts 4-6 (pp. 87-180)

*Practice portfolios due

*Final accountability group documentation due

APPENDIX:

Capstone Project Proposal Outline (approx. 10 typed pages; due last field seminar date)

I.   Inception of idea – how did you get the idea for your project; how does it fit with your professional goals, beliefs, and values? any relevance to personal experiences or faith?

II. Clear description of project – what exactly you're doing, what finished product will be, how its effectiveness will be assessed. For example, if you're starting a group, describe how group members will be selected, session formats/curriculum, facilitator preparation, cost, meeting place/time, and assessment of effectiveness.

III. Articulation of workable steps toward project completion and projected timeline.

IV. Necessary conversations – identify people who you plan to contact/collaborate with in order to complete your project. This will include your field instructor and possibly agency administrators, consumers, and other key constituents. Describe what you anticipate their specific roles in your project to be.

V. Resources – what costs, time, contacts, knowledge, and agency support will be necessary to complete project. Identify existing professional strengths that will assist project completion.

VI. Obstacles – any anticipated barriers to project completion and how these may be addressed. Identify professional growth areas that may assist project completion.

VII.   Relevant literature review from professional and popular sources relevant to your project in order for you to understand prior work/research relevant to your plans. Please use APA format; this will probably be about 3 pages long.

VIII.   Project compatibility with prior MSW classroom knowledge & field experience, especially in regard to diverse and at-risk populations.

IX. Plan for portfolio documentation of project for future employment searches – for example, drafts of project proposal for field instructor, agendas for any meetings related to the project, possible photo documentation (with consideration of confidentiality).

X. Plan for achieving project sustainability following student graduation.