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The Master of Arts in Child Advocacy: A Contribution to an Emerging Discipline

Robert D. McCormick

SUMMARY. Recent heinous examples of child neglect and abuse in the State of New Jersey have called into question how public child welfare workers are trained. The author, in collaboration with the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) and other experts in the field of child welfare, worked on the development of a new degree that would more appropriately educate these workers. This paper discusses the development of the Master of Arts of Child Advocacy and its optional Concentration in Public Child Welfare and offers its curriculum as an alternative to the Master of Arts of Social Work (MSW). Child Advocacy is also explored as a new and emerging discipline. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress. com> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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It is well documented that many undergraduate and graduate programs in the United States are not providing current and future law enforcement officers, social workers, psychologists, medical professionals, child protection attorneys, and other professionals with the skills necessary to handle cases of child protection competently.[1] Frontline child protection professionals are increasingly vocal in calling on universities to provide better training.[2]

In recognition of this fact, the United States Congress appropriated funds to create the National Child Protection Training Center (NCPTC).[3] A primary purpose of the NCPTC is to assist in developing and promoting model child protection curricula at institutions of higher education.[4] Good examples of such innovative curricula can be found at Montclair State University (MSU)[5] in New Jersey. To address the need for better child protection training at the undergraduate and graduate levels, MSU has implemented a series of educational innovations. First, the MSU faculty created an undergraduate concentration in child advocacy within its multidisciplinary Justice Studies major (it is also open to students from other majors). Second, MSU faculty members designated six courses for child protection professionals who are already in the field. Upon completion of the courses, professionals in the field receive a post-baccalaureate certificate in child advocacy. Finally, MSU faculty most recently developed a master's degree program in child advocacy to meet the needs of social workers and other professionals desiring a career primarily, if not exclusively, in the field of child protection.

In this paper, I provide an overview of each of these MSU curricula, in hopes it will prove useful as other universities revise or develop undergraduate and graduate courses in the field of child protection.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY: UNDERGRADUATE CONCENTRATION IN CHILD ADVOCACY

In 1999, MSU began offering a major in Justice Studies with concentrations in Paralegal Studies, Justice Systems and Child Advocacy.[6]

This latter concentration was designed to prepare students to advocate for children in a variety of settings. The program presently has over five hundred students and draws its resources from the participating departments of legal studies, sociology, and psychology.

POST-BA CERTIFICATE

The undergraduate program provided a platform from which to address the needs of professionals already in the field. Many of New Jersey's child protection professionals are employed by the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS). DYFS workers could have degrees in virtually any area of academic study. In 1999, there were no formal credentials or training programs in child advocacy in the State of New Jersey. With the help of experts in the field, a Post-BA Certificate in Child Advocacy was developed. This was the first professional credential in the state that recognized child advocacy as a field requiring specific training. The Division of Youth and Family Services funded this program and each certificate bore DYFS' imprimatur: "Approved by the Division of Youth and Family Services."

To earn the certificate, students must complete five courses: (a) Introduction to Child Advocacy, (b) Children and Justice, (c) Child Abuse and Neglect, (d) Interviewing Skills for the Child Advocate, and (e) Current Social Issues in Child Advocacy. The course offering of the Post-BA Certificate in Child Advocacy, similar to their undergraduate counterparts, were intended to reflect the multidisciplinary nature and content of the field itself. Experts in the field of child advocacy praised the program. The Director of the Division of Youth and Family Services hailed the program as "innovative, creative, and perfectly suited for DYFS workers." It is significant that MSU faculty worked closely with DYFS from the beginning. Student response to the certificate program was equally positive. In addition to providing child welfare professionals with appropriate content in courses that were relevant to what they did, the Post-BA Certificate "experience," that is, the relationship that developed between faculty and student, served to improve markedly the morale at work.[7]

In addition to covering full tuition, New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services allowed employees to leave work early on class days. There were also a number of non-DYFS child protection professionals enrolled in the program. The program allows seasoned DYFS workers to mix with newly minted graduate students. Students' back-

grounds also differed remarkably with graduates from a myriad undergraduate majors and/or professional fields. This created a wonderful cross-pollination of the learning experience.

MASTER'S DEGREE IN CHILD ADVOCACY

In developing an undergraduate program and the post-BA certificate in child advocacy, it became clear that to work in the "system," it was necessary to collapse disciplinary boundaries. Child advocacy research makes it obvious that the field demands a multidisciplinary approach to child protection.[8]

It is within this philosophical perspective that Montclair State University developed its Master of Arts in Child Advocacy[9] along with its optional concentration in Public Child Welfare.[10] The process was a lengthy one. Nevertheless, the journey was rich in learning, the dialogue energizing and passionate, and the resulting degree relevant to what child advocates do.

While the post-BA certificate in child advocacy offered DYFS workers and others a unique opportunity to broaden their understanding of the public child welfare system, it also stimulated thinking among MSU faculty about a more academic degree. Presently, the most advanced degree for professionals working in the system is the Master of Social Work (MSW) degree. The post-BA certificate had proven that a program of study could be developed that would enhance the knowledge of DYFS workers. The faculty believed that a professional degree could be developed that would offer a curriculum optimally suited for the child protection worker. Therefore, the faculty embarked on developing a new degree for the field, the Master of Arts in Child Advocacy, with an optional concentration in public child welfare. This was designed to offer a viable, cost-efficient alternative to the MSW, one that would focus exclusively on the child welfare system, enabling graduates to begin work without the further training required of MSWs who begin work at DYFS upon graduation.

The first challenge facing MSU faculty was the absence of practical models for the concept of a graduate degree in child advocacy. In most states, the degree of choice for working in the Public Child Welfare system and other related fields within child advocacy is the MSW. While a perfectly fine degree, the faculty of Montclair State University observed subtle, and in some programs, not so subtle,

shifts in the MSW curriculum. Over the past two decades, perhaps as a result of gaining licensure requirements,[11] many MSW programs appear to be less concerned with teaching students to work directly with families influenced by child abuse and neglect, poverty, and domestic violence, and more concerned with preparing students for private practice or administration. Although this might be a general trend, it appears to be particularly true in this region of the country where social workers often have lucrative private practices.

MSU faculty discussions with DYFS personnel confirmed there was a wide chasm between the education offered in an MSW program and the needs of the Division. Newly hired MSW graduates along with many entry-level employees had to be (re)trained. Not only was this costly for DYFS but it also delayed the use of these personnel until they were adequately educated. To address this situation, MSU sought to develop a program from which students would proceed seamlessly from classroom to actual work. To achieve this goal, MSU urged DYFS to participate actively in designing the curriculum. What follows is an outline of this process along with comments that allow the reader to understand what exactly this new MA contributes to the field of child advocacy.

FOCUS GROUPS

During the summer of 2002 the faculty of Montclair State University's Center for Child Advocacy ran focus groups to garner input regarding the potential content of a Master of Arts in Child Advocacy. The groups included experts in the field of child advocacy with an emphasis on public child welfare. Attorneys, DYFS workers at various levels of employment, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), clinical psychologists, social workers, and sociologists all attended lengthy meetings, engaged in lively and productive dialogue and helped to frame this program.

CURRICULUM

Although some members of the focus groups identified child advocacy as essentially a field to help neglected and abused children, MSU

adopted the view of the majority of the working group members for a more inclusive definition and developed a degree to reflect this view. The result was the development of the Master of Arts in Child Advocacy with an optional concentration in Public Child Welfare. MSU faculty concluded that the general MA would allow for the creation of additional "concentrations" or certificate programs under its aegis, while the Public Child Welfare Concentration would address specifically the educational needs of those working for DYFS, CASA, and similar agencies. Both state and national consultants praised the program. Barbara Bonner, an internationally respected expert in child advocacy, stated that the " . . . MA in Child Advocacy appears to represent an opportunity for MSU to not only provide a valuable academic experience for students in New Jersey, but to become a model program for other universities nationwide. . . . It is well designed, has superb faculty, and meets the state's need for highly trained personnel in the field of child welfare."[12]

The curriculum provides a unique learning experience for students. It combines both theoretical and applied components. Beyond a 33-credit course of study, students may elect to write a research thesis or take an additional class. To complement this more academic aspect of the program, students take either a Practicum in Child Advocacy or, in the Concentration in Public Child Welfare, both a Practicum and an Externship. Students receive experience in a myriad of settings including the Juvenile Justice System, CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates), Residential Treatment Facilities, Child Advocacy Centers, and the Division of Youth and Family Services.

The curriculum reflects the multidisciplinary nature of child advocacy. Each and every course contains aspects of several disciplines that are necessary to ensure appropriate training. For example, in a course such as Interviewing Skills for the Child Advocate, students are taught how to perform a clinical interview with children (psychology) along with whatever restrictions may be placed on their interviewing (law). The curriculum is infused with this multidisciplinary perspective and each course has been crafted to reflect this approach, one that MSU faculty members believe best represents the field of child advocacy.

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK VS. THE MASTER OF ARTS IN CHILD ADVOCACY

The MA in Child Advocacy is an alternative degree to the more familiar Master of Social Work degree. While the MSW is a recognized and relevant credential in the field of public child welfare, the MA in Child Advocacy offers at least four advantages.

First, the MA in Child Advocacy was developed directly with the individuals who know public child welfare best: DYFS workers, professional staff, CASA personnel, attorneys, and psychologists who work in the field. It is not a generic degree, but rather one that focuses specifically and exclusively on child advocacy.

Second, unlike most MSW degrees, the MA in Child Advocacy is a multidisciplinary program. The courses, the practicum, the externship, and the thesis adhere to this orientation.

Third, MSW curricula often reflect student interest in private practice. The MA in Child Advocacy focuses exclusively on relevant course content for those interested in working as child advocates within the public child welfare system. Developed by experts in the field, the content validity of the MA in Child Advocacy curriculum is high. Students graduating with this degree will need little, if any, on-the-job training.

Fourth, the MA in Child Advocacy provides direct and intense experience in the field through practicum and externship experiences. Both of these experiences are accompanied by on-site supervision and a weekly graduate class that offers additional off-site supervision.

THE FUTURE

Montclair State University has a broad view of child advocacy. Although the Concentration in Public Child Welfare is primarily focused on child abuse and neglect, it achieves this through a multidisciplinary and therefore a broad perspective. The Master of Arts in Child Advocacy allows for even broader definitions. In the future, MSU plans to offer additional concentrations and/or certificate programs in Special Education Advocacy, Parenting Advocacy, and other programs developed by it's Center for Child Advocacy[13] devoted to such topics as first-time fathers, parents of adolescents, or other topics that impact directly on the well-being of children.

CONCLUSION

It is necessary to raise the bar on educating the child advocate. The Master of Social Work, the present degree of choice in the field, covers too much academic material and lacks an exclusive focus on child advocacy. MSU's Master of Arts in Child Advocacy is not a degree for the private practitioner. It is for the individual who wishes to devote his/her professional career to working in the system. Often, new disciplines emerge from the mixture of old ones, such as psychology, which emerged in toward the end of the 19th century from philosophy, psychophysics, and physiology. The Master of Arts in Child Advocacy represents such a blending of disciplines. This degree offers professionals and students an innovative curriculum seen through a multidisciplinary template and a course of study more compatible with the work of the child advocate.

The Master of Arts in Child Advocacy validates child advocacy as an emerging discipline. Presently, most courses and/or programs in child advocacy are found in departments such as justice studies, sociology, and psychology. The faculty of MSU feels strongly that child advocacy represents a way of thinking about children that is unique. Although child advocacy courses may exist in psychology or sociology, for example, our faculty contends that the discipline-specific perspective of that particular field limits these courses. To be a child advocate implies a knowledge of many areas of inquiry and several domains of knowledge and, together, these form a whole much greater than the sum of their parts.

NOTES

1. *See* Victor Vieth, *Unto the Third Generation: A Call to End Child Abuse in the United States Within 120 Years*, (this volume) notes 35-43, 68-90, and accompanying text.

2. *See* Maja Beckstrom, *Good guy vs. bad guys*, St. Paul Pioneer Press at 1F (May 23, 2004) (article noting the enthusiastic reaction of an audience of child protection professionals to a call to reform the undergraduate and graduate training these professionals receive and quoting one social worker as claiming "Everyone knows it's on the job training").

3. *Gutnecht: WSU to get DOJ Grant*, Winona Daily News at 1A (article discussing the announcement by United States Congressman Gil Gutnecht that the U.S. Department of Justice awarded the NCPTC federal funds to "develop a model college curriculum" for child protection professionals). In a December 12, 2003 press release, United States Senator Mark Dayton announced the 2003 omnibus bill included funds for the NCPTC for the purpose of developing a model child protection curriculum. This press

release can be accessed at:
http://dayton.senate.gov/~dayton/releases/2003/12/2003 c12445.html

4. Victor I. Vieth, *The National Child Protection Training Center: A Partnership Between APRI and Winona State University*, 38(1) The Prosecutor 33 (January/February 2004).

5. Montclair State University is a four-year liberal arts college located in Montclair, New Jersey.

6. To graduate from MSU with a major in Justice Studies and a concentration in Child Advocacy, students must complete the following nine courses: Perspectives on Justice Studies I, Perspectives on Justice Studies II, Research in Justice Studies: Social Science Perspective, Foundations of Legal Research, Child Psychology, Children's Rights and Child Advocacy, Forensic Psychology, Contemporary Issues in Child Advocacy, and an externship. Students must also complete at least two of the following courses: Adolescent Psychology, Psychology of Aggression, Mental Health Issues of Hispanic Americans, Psychology of the Black Experience, the Black Family, Psychology and Law, or Introduction to Community Psychology. Finally, students must take at least two of the following courses: Family Law, Mediation Process and its Applications, State and Local Government, or Psychology of Women. For more information about these courses, visit the MSU web site at <http://www.montclair.edu>.

7. Exit interviews with students emphasized positive feelings toward the certificate and improved morale at work. Graduates attributed this to their educational experience at MSU that included course work, faculty and the student-friendly environment.

8. *See generally, The Benefits of Working as a Multidisciplinary Team*, published in Investigation and Prosecution of Child Abuse Third Edition xxix-xliv (2004) (SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA).

9. To receive the Master of Arts in Child Advocacy, students must complete the following courses: Introduction to Applied Child Advocacy, Child Abuse and Neglect, Current Social Issues in Child Advocacy, Children and Justice, Theoretical and Applied Models of Interviewing Children, Selected Topics in Child Advocacy, and a practicum. Students must also take at least one of the following courses: Adolescents in the System, Substance Abuse and Families in Crisis, Family Empowerment Models, Child Protective Service Investigation, Child Welfare Policy. Finally, students must take at least two of the following courses: Counseling the Alcoholic and the Substance Abuser, Multicultural Counseling, Mentally Impaired and Chemically Addicted Client, Counseling the Family, Selected Problems in Counseling Handicapped Persons, Evidence, Juvenile Law, Education Law, Child in the Family, Intercultural Study of the Family.

10. To complete the MA in Child Advocacy with a concentration in Public Child Welfare, students must complete the following courses: Introduction to Applied Child Advocacy, Child Abuse and Neglect, Current Social Issues in Child Advocacy, Children and Justice, and Theoretical and Applied Models for Interviewing Children. Students must also select three courses from the following: Adolescents in the System, Substance Abuse and Families in Crisis, Family Empowerment Models, Child Protective Service Investigation, Permanency Planning, Child Welfare Policy. Finally, students must complete the course "Selected Topics in Child Advocacy" as well as complete a practicum and an Externship in Public Child Welfare.

11. *See* Victor Vieth, *Unto the Third Generation: A Call to End Child Abuse in the United States Within 120 Years* (this volume) notes 37-38 and accompanying text (noting the Council on Social Work education, the organization that accredits undergradu-

ate social work programs discourages concentration in specific fields such as child protection).

12. Barbara Bonner, *Consultant's Report on a New Academic Program: Master of Arts Degree in Child Advocacy*, November 4, 2003 (the original of this document is on file at Montclair State University).

13. Further information about the Center for Child Advocacy at MSU is available at: <http://chss2.montcliar.edu/cca/>.