Trends in Human Services: Professional Development, Competition for Funding, and Staff Positions in the Field

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The human services field consistently adapts to the changes in society in order to meet the needs of people. These changes can be triggered by shifts in political office, natural disaster, or societal views. This paper will identify the recent historical context and future implications for the current trends in the human services field. More specifically, this paper will examine the areas of policy changes, competition for funding, and professional development opportunities.

Natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, are an example of how an environmental change can impact social services. Agencies in the area immediately affected by Hurricane Katrina were unable to provide services until emergency personnel deemed it safe. People sought refuge in makeshift shelters with objectionable conditions; the lack of food, water, sanitation, and sleeping quarters kept a large number of people in need of help. The federal government flew evacuees to other parts of the country, where emergency response services were mobilized and waiting. In Omaha, Nebraska, for example, the Omaha Civic Center prepared just days before the arrival of evacuees (Office of the Governor, State of Nebraska, 2005). Food, clothing, sleeping quarters, hygiene stations, medical staff, human service agencies, telephones, computers, and clergy were ready to provide assistance. In this case, the community of Omaha banded together, quickly and efficiently, to adapt to a need of a group of people. This is a prime example of how human services adapts, sometimes very quickly, to the ever-changing needs of society and its citizens.

The financial collapse of 2008 brought a sense of impending doom for the people who lost their jobs, their homes, and their livelihoods. The stock market had fallen, the mortgage and
manufacturing industries were in turmoil, and mass layoffs ensued. The overall wellbeing of the citizens of the United States was at stake. Wiseman and Brasher (2008) define wellbeing as “a combination of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfill their potential” (p358). To place that definition into the context of the financial crisis, it is important to note that the financial crisis caused problems in every aspect of the definition’s key elements. Without quick human services and government intervention, the people affected by the crisis were likely to experience lingering effects for years to come, with widespread fear of another Great Depression.

The human services field was not immune to this crisis. In the midst of adapting to the needs of those who lost everything, many programs with federal funding sources were cut. The remaining programs were given stringent requirements in order to keep funding. Human service workers in programs such as Youth Build were reassigned or laid off, while the participants in these programs went without services that would help them better their lives. The human services field was resilient, however, and adapted quickly to provide necessary services while adjusting to changes in policy (Henriksen, Smith, & Zimmer, 2011, p482).

Whilst adapting to policy and societal changes, new agencies and programs were established in order to assist people affected by mental illness, developmental disabilities, and the elderly. These new programs receive government funding through Medicaid or Medicare (Henriksen et al., 2011, p483). These areas of the human services field are not the only ones experiencing increases, though. From 2004 to 2007, the fields of individual and family services increased by 7,000 providers, while emergency providers of food, housing, and energy assistance increased by almost 1,100 agencies (Henriksen et al., 2011, p489).
In addition to an increase in providers and programs, there are several additional trends emerging as a result of the economic conditions in the United States. Some of these trends include an increase in competition among non-profits and for-profits, greater pressure for accountability and positive outcomes, collaboration incentives between government and non-profit agencies, and an increase in agency vulnerability due to the constraints of federal dollars (Henriksen et al., 2011, p489-491). These revenue issues have come about at a time of political uneasiness and regulatory modifications. In order for agencies to obtain and retain government funding, regulatory oversight has increased with additional performance indicators and accountability practices. These changes specifically affect the mental health, welfare, foster care, and workforce development fields, which rely heavily on federal dollars to operate. The majority of government contracts are now performance based, with a potential for growth (e.g. increase in funding) with demonstration of positive outcomes (Henriksen et al., 2011, p491-492).

In order to acclimate to regulation and oversight changes in funding contracts, human service agencies must adopt a stricter management style (Wareing & Hendricks, 2013, p13). Reducing programs that are not profitable, accepting only clients who have funding sources, and increasing geographical service areas are all ways that non-profits are adapting to the changing human services field. Larger agencies, such as Catholic Charities, are able to absorb the additional funding and regulatory requirements with greater ease than small, grassroots organizations (Henriksen et al., 2011, p491). Larger agencies have greater capacity to change programs, add new programs, and meet the stringent government standards with additional frontline and managerial staff. Major coalitions of agencies and professionals in the human services field continue to work on policy shifts and government funding regulations (Henriksen et al., 2011, p492-493). In hindsight, it appears that the fiscal pressures resulting from the 2008
crisis have sped up the reform process. In order to assess wellbeing in its current state, it may be beneficial to complete follow-up research, identifying how the United States has recovered from the social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political pressures of the 2008 financial crisis.

For agencies that may not qualify for government funding, or are unable to qualify alone, creative alternatives are becoming a new part of the human service field (Wareing & Hendrick, 2013, p12). Some grants and funding sources require partnerships between agencies in order to provide services. The Summer Youth Program (SYP) of 2009, for example, was part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Participants had to meet Workforce Investment Act (WIA) entrance requirements in order to be accepted into the program. Once accepted, youth were placed into summer jobs. They received bi-weekly paychecks, the intention being that the youth would push their income back into the economy. Although the program was headed by Goodwill Omaha, additional agencies provided supports, including office space, temporary youth positions, and staff.

Collaborations and partnerships among agencies are opportunities to learn how to work together, maximize resources, and work towards a common goal (Wareing & Hendrick, 2013, p12). In order to achieve these goals and the objectives of the human services field, staff with proper training and credentials are vital to success. Trends in human services education ensure that human services professionals are adequately prepared to begin or advance their careers in the field. The historical background of social work education, seguing into human services education today, is important to demonstrate the shift in employment standards for education in this field.
Social work schools are an essential training tool for the development of the helping profession. In 1950, there were 47 schools offering social work programs at a master’s level, while only 8 schools provided a doctoral program (Schilling, Morrish, & Liu, 2008, p104). Of these programs, less than 2,000 students graduated annually, with 68% of those graduates being women. By 1974, the number of master’s programs had increased to 79, and by 2000, there were 139 programs. Between 1974 and 2000, the number of women graduates swelled from 65% to almost 85%. Healy (2004) argued that changes in the human services labor force will continue to encourage women to work in the field while pursuing advanced degrees, thus causing a feminization of the profession (p107). Schilling et al. (2008) also suggests that as the number of female graduates continues to increase, along with a surge in educational programs, social work will likely join nursing and library science as professions dominated by women (p106).

Another one of the biggest trends in human service or social work education today is the concept of distance learning. Online learning has become an essential tool for human services professionals seeking to advance their education, students located in rural areas with little access to higher education, and individuals who are financially strained. Online outcomes are comparable to traditional classrooms (Vernon, Pittman-Munke, Vakalahi, Adkins, & Pierce, 2009, p263). There are four identified types of distance learning: correspondence courses provided by mail, television learning delivered on channels such as the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), print materials with frequent teacher communication, and web-based learning. All four types are still in use today. Although the concept of distance education has existed in some form since the 1800s, it has grown significantly in recent years (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008, p95). Vernon et al. (2009) argues that technology enhances the learning process in that it facilitates greater communication and decision making skills. One of the limitations of an online program is
the lack of face-to-face interaction. Considering that many social work students are self-described “people persons,” it is an interesting idiosyncrasy that courses do not require or encourage in person contact (Vernon et al., 2009, p269).

The adult learner is more focused, goal-directed, and motivated by an internal drive (Vernon et al., 2009, p264), and online master’s programs are more prominent than any other online human services degree (p267). The student’s increased motivation and internal drive provides more accountability for the online environment, as web-based programs have little to no face-to-face interaction within the “classroom.” Classes conducted entirely online are available, but sharing credits between schools is a concept not yet embraced by the educational aspect of human services (Vernon et al., 2009, p268). Just as human services agencies collaborate to pool resources, staff, and ideas; it may be beneficial for collegiate entities to partner in the same way.

In order for additional colleges and universities to offer master’s programs entirely online for their human services majors, the infrastructure and technological support systems must be securely in place and updated frequently. Faculty may need training in new technology, such as Blackboard or another online course management system, and online teaching methods differ from a traditional classroom model (Vernon et al., 2009, p271-272). One also might question how to foster the development and retention of professional relationships amongst students, without face-to-face interactions.

In order to meet the ever-changing burdens of the world, the human services profession is in an almost constant state of change. Adapting to regulations, societal needs, and funding regulations ensures that the people of the United States and beyond have their needs met. Thus, it is extremely important for professionals in the human services field to study and understand the
history of the profession, current trends, and implications for the future. It is equally important to provide high quality and accessible educational opportunities for individuals seeking to work in the human services field, or advance their career. Quality human services provision and the individuals served by the profession, count on it.
References


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