6-2012

Connecting Students and Professional Associations: A Curricular Approach

Shirley Simon
Loyola University Chicago, ssimon@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/socialwork_facpubs

Part of the Social Work Commons

10
Connecting students and professional associations: A curricular approach

Shirley R. Simon

Introduction

This chapter describes and assesses a curricular approach to connecting students and professional associations. In order to forge a consistent ongoing connection, a curricular rather than the more common extra-curricula response is advocated. A course module addressing the role of professional associations in today's practice environment was developed and embedded in the group work classes at a university in the mid-west United States. This module utilizes readings, discussions, presentations and attendance at a professional association meeting to explore this topic. The chapter reports on the initial impact of this module, and recommends increased curricular attention to facilitating this connection.

Professional association membership

Professional associations have a long history of advocacy, education, certification and ongoing networking and member support. In recent years, membership in a broad range of professional associations has suffered declines (Gonzales & Scarcella, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Simon,

Webster, & Horn, 2007; Sullivan, 2006). Whether it be larger, more well-known professional associations like the American Medical Association (AMA) or the American Bar Association (ABA), more mid-range associations like the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), or smaller, more specialized associations like the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG), there is a struggle to maintain and grow membership.

The membership challenges arise from multiple sources. The difficult economic climate, of course, plays a significant role; association membership dues constitute a discretionary expense that is subject to elimination when one is faced with financial struggles. Individuals in today's increasingly complex society are also less likely to join groups, whether they be neighborhood book clubs or large-scale associations (Putnam, 2000). The groups and organizations that were critical components of previous generations (Rotary clubs, neighborhood block clubs, bowling groups) are no longer magnets for the young. However, this is not simply a societal shift in the types of groups attracting membership, but rather an overall decline in commitment to any groups or associations. As Putnam writes in his bestselling 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, "During the first two-thirds of the [twentieth] century Americans took a more active role in the social and political life of their communities – in churches and union halls, in bowling alleys and clubrooms, around committee tables and card tables and dinner tables" (p.183). In addition, technology has allowed us to communicate and gather information without the requisite face-to-face interactions of the past. Given a choice of obtaining information by attending an association meeting or conducting an Internet search, many now opt for the latter. Finally, the sheer complexity of today's social and economic environment and the resulting reduction in "free-time" discourage broad-based participation in professional and community groups.

What is the impact of this decline in association membership? For some, the very existence of the association is threatened. Not long ago, the President of AASWG, Nancy Sullivan, wrote that "AASWG's survival is in question. There have been changes over the past few years that have taken a toll. Our membership has slipped…and a small number of committed Board members are carrying a heavy load" (May 2006, 10).

The opportunity to connect students and professional associations is a mutually beneficial one. As discussed in Simon, Webster, and Horn's 2007 article, "A critical call: Connecting students and professional

associations", there are significant benefits for both constituencies. For students, there are opportunities to 1) feel connected professionally, 2) network with others and build relationships with potential mentors, 3) get job referrals and information about potential job opportunities, 4) become involved with an association that advocates for their chosen professional interests and passions, 5) receive information via publications, conferences, and conversations about the most current efforts and activities in their areas of interest, and, 6) if desired, present their own work at the association's meetings and conferences (Desmond & Symens, 1997; Gonzales & Scarcella, 2001; Knight, 2002; Messmer, 2005). Moreover, professional associations can help bridge the educational gap as students leave academia and move on to the practice arena (Koch and Sancier, 1988).

For professional associations, the benefits are no less significant. Professional associations cannot continue to exist without the influx of new members. Students and emerging professionals represent a large potential source of additional memberships. If associations are to grow and flourish, involving youthful, energetic and largely optimistic young professionals in association activities is key.

For group work associations like AASWG, this connection looms even more critical. With group work's diminished role within social work education (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994; Drumm, 2006; Kurland, et al., 2004; Middleman, 1990), maintaining viable professional associations that advocate for this long-standing social work method is essential. Moreover, with the aging of many of the leaders of social group work and the loss of their voices as spokespersons for this modality, it is critical to groom new leadership to continue their legacy. Where better to begin this process than with students who are open and excited about their new professional journeys? The question becomes how best to connect these constituencies. Recognizing the mutual benefits of connecting professional associations with current students, the author assessed opportunities to do so. Having previously achieved some success via extracurricular encouragement, role-modeling personal involvement, and discussion of personal experiences with students, and having motivated small cohorts of students to attend and even present at AASWG meetings (Simon, Webster, & Horn, 2007), the author now concluded that this process seemed all too random. The majority of students would not be reached by these methods. Given the potential benefits of connecting students with professional associations, it seemed imperative to find other ways to inform and encourage *all* MSW students to become involved.

Background

At this juncture, within the author's home university, there had been little formal curricular or extra-curricular opportunity within the MSW program for regular, planned student exposure to the many voluntary professional associations that support the work of the professional social worker. Students might have heard about an association through a class or a particular instructor, but there was no systematic effort to connect all MSW students with professional associations. Students, therefore, were often unaware of the benefits of being part of these communities.

It became clear that a *curricular* rather than an *extra*-curricular effort was needed. With a curricular inclusion in required courses, *all* MSW students could be exposed to the critical role of professional associations. Having a section of a required course dedicated to professional associations underscores the commitment of both the school and the profession to these organizations. As discussed in Simon, Webster and Horn (2007), the academic community can and should play a pivotal role in connecting students and professional associations. Embedding curricular content within required coursework establishes a dedicated time for reflection and assessment of the function and place of these associations in one's professional career. Curricular inclusions can focus on information about the historical significance of professional associations, their contemporary goals and purposes, opportunities for participation in association activities, and the process of presenting at professional conferences. (Eitzen, 1988; Simon, Webster, & Horn, 2007). Moreover, discussions and assignments can compel the student to personalize the information and forge connections on a practical, experiential basis. Armed with this knowledge and experience, students will be better prepared to leave the relative safety of the academic community and counter the all too frequent professional "burn-out" and isolation by seeking support and connection from their peers in professional associations (Goodman & Munoz, 2004).

The module

After deciding to proceed with the implementation of a curricular module to address the role of professional associations, the next step was to determine an appropriate home within the MSW course offerings. The author turned to the required group work course, Social Work Practice with Groups, and developed a course module to be added to its syllabus. While other courses, such as field work seminars or the introductory social welfare courses, could also appropriately house this content, the author deemed group work courses as ideal offerings for this module since associations can indeed be viewed as groups – groups of peers voluntarily connecting and working together for their mutual benefit and that of those they serve. Viewing professional associations not as bureaucratic organizations, but rather as groups designed to support and enhance one's life work, fits well within the framework of most group work curricula.

The focus of the module is to enhance the MSW student's knowledge, experience and appreciation for the role of professional associations as a significant component of one's chosen profession, and a potentially supportive community for one's ongoing development as a social work professional. The module addresses 1) the historical and societal role of professional associations; 2) the current challenges facing professional associations; 3) the range and purposes of pertinent social work/welfare professional associations; 4) first-hand experience with at least one meeting/seminar/conference of a social work/welfare organization; and 5) the personal significance and potential impact of being part of such a community.

In preparation for teaching this module, the author developed a substantive alphabetical list of social work/social welfare professional associations by enlisting the support of the local educational and practice communities. The final reference list covered a wide spectrum of associations. It incorporated 1) the name and purpose of the association, 2) local and national contact information including the name and phone number of a specific individual when possible, 3) time and location of meetings, and 4) information about upcoming activities, conferences, and events sponsored by the association. These lists were disseminated to all students enrolled in the course.

The components of the module include:

- *Readings*

  The module includes required readings on the role, history, and challenges of current social work/welfare associations. Brief overviews of the objectives, activities, and agendas of two locally affiliated professional associations are also required readings. In addition, articles addressing the benefits of being a member of a professional association are included. (Please see Appendix A for a list of some of the required readings.)

- *First-hand connection with a professional association*

  In addition to the readings, the module requires an out-of-class connection with a professional association and a written assessment of that experience. Specifically, each student is asked to attend a meeting of a professional voluntary association (NASW, AASWG, etc.), and write a brief paper assessing this experience through 1) the lens of a group worker, and 2) its potential influence on one's personal/professional aspirations.

  The written assignment is designed to weave together the constructs and terms of group work – e.g., categories of groups, properties of groups, therapeutic factors of group work - and the assessment of the professional association experience. It is in the application of the principles of group work that the observations and understanding of the association are seen as a *group* experience and the association becomes perceived in this light. Subsequently, it is in the assessment and discussion of the student's experience with a professional association that the role, purpose, and functions of an association become clear and meaningful. By having an actual, personal experience with a professional association, the student is able to more fully grasp the potential significance of such associations. (Please see Appendix B for a copy of the written assignment.)

- *Class discussions*

  Class discussions focus on students' reactions to the readings, their experience or lack of experience with professional associations, and their expectations about becoming part of an association. Students describe their initial perceptions about professional associations, and some share experiences with professional associations both within social work and in other professional careers.

  Students also discuss their concerns about attending a meeting of a professional association while not yet being a professional.

Questions arise about whether they would feel uncomfortable or different. Students wonder whether the associations would welcome them, ignore them, or make them feel uninformed. Addressing these concerns within the class allows students to universalize their fears and receive affirmations from the class and instructor. Attending the meetings then becomes easier and less intimidating.

Once the association visits have been completed, a class discussion about the students' experience and learning takes place. This allows class members to hear about others' experiences and compare and contrast their own perceptions. The variety of associations and the many opportunities for engagement are typically highlighted through these discussions. They serve as a valuable summary and closure experience for the module.

- *Class presentation by a student attendee/presenter at a conference*
  The module also includes a presentation by a student or recent alum who has previously presented at or attended a major social work conference. The presenter discusses his/her experience at the conference and its personal and professional impact. This personal connection to another student who has actually done what appears daunting and potentially overwhelming, can be invaluable. It speaks to the significance of the experience, and brings home the opportunities that such participation can provide, demonstrating on a personal level what participating in a professional association can mean.

  If the speaker has presented at a symposium/conference, he/she typically brings the poster or Power Point and shares a brief overview of the topic and the process of preparing the presentation. Students then ask specific questions, and typically several become motivated to pursue further involvement with presenting at or attending a conference. The presenting student frequently offers to discuss the experience further with individual students and provides phone numbers or email contact information. The energy and enthusiasm for becoming involved with an association is noticeably higher following such presentations. Hearing from a peer is a powerful motivator that cannot be duplicated via readings or instructor-led discussion.

Outcomes

To date, the modules have been utilized in two different academic terms. The initial response from both students and associations has been very positive. Students participated in a broad range of association meetings including the National Association of Social Workers, National Association of Black Social Workers, Latino Social Work Association, Association for Infant Mental Health, Association for School Social Workers, Society for Clinical Social Work and, of course, AASWG. Moreover, students not only attended the meetings, but frequently reported feeling positively connected to a supportive group of professionals. In addition, some students actually became involved in the ongoing activities of the respective association, occasionally even assuming a leadership role on a committee or activity.

Comments from the students' written assignments demonstrated the impact of the module in the following areas: 1) Fostering enthusiasm for the profession, 2) Providing opportunities to contribute to the profession, 3) Enhancing the student's learning opportunities, 4) Increasing the appreciation for the role and significance of professional associations, and 5) Inspiring self-confidence and motivating students to assume leadership positions. Students voiced satisfaction and learning in all five areas. In addition, student membership in professional associations grew substantially. At the beginning and end of the course, students were asked to identify the name and number of professional associations to which they belonged. In one class, self-reported association memberships rose from 41% to 61%, and in another course, memberships rose from 18% to 61%. Informal feedback from the associations was equally positive. Association leaders reported that the students' presence energized meetings. Their questions facilitated broader discussions about association goals and activities. "Regular" members reached out to the students and encouraged their career choices and occasionally even began a mentorship relationship.

Within the local AASWG chapter, the effects of the students' participation were widely felt. Since AASWG meetings are held in a convenient, campus location, students found it practical to attend these gatherings. Some meetings even had to be relocated to larger venues due to the influx of students. Several participating students have assumed chapter co-chairmanships and sub-committee leadership positions. The existing leadership has begun to restructure the monthly meetings when the attendance of student cohorts is anticipated.

Additional speakers and educational offerings can now be scheduled with the assurance that there will be sufficient attendance and participation. Similar to the international association symposia, the chapter leadership has been very welcoming to the students, engaging and encouraging participation without demanding it.

At the author's home university, there appears to be greater appreciation for the role and potential impact of the group work courses. As positive feedback from various association leaders about the students' increasing presence and contributions to their meetings has been received, this has been transmitted to the school's administration through formal and informal channels. Because connecting to other social service organizations and the broader social work community is a priority for the institution, these connections exemplify this objective and highlight the importance of the group work offerings.

While two experiences with a course module are insufficient to demonstrate a valid, reliable trend, it appears that the inclusion of this module can have considerable impact. It remains to be seen whether this impact will be sustained. However, it is encouraging to see that facilitating connections between students and professional associations via a curricular model can result in mutual enthusiasm and appreciation.

Conclusion

It is clear that connecting social work students with the professional associations that advocate for their profession and their clients can be a mutually beneficial activity. As discussed in this chapter, there is great potential for students to gain support, knowledge, opportunities and connections; associations can gain valuable input, energy and memberships. Ultimately, of course, such connections benefit both the profession and the clients it serves. Academia can serve as a bridge to unite these two constituencies, and this author believes that it needs to do so. Professional education must include strong, broad-based efforts to connect these two constituencies. If professional associations are to reach the wider student constituency, schools of social work cannot rely on extra-curricular incentives alone. While extra-curricular efforts are valuable initiatives, curricular efforts offer the added potential

of reaching all students. The curricular incentives embedded in class requirements and evaluative grading are powerful motivators, and can be harnessed to encourage appreciation for and connections to professional associations. Once the connection has been made, it is, of course, up to the associations to take advantage of the students' presence and facilitate an ongoing relationship. This chapter presents one model for incorporating professional association information and experience within the curriculum of a school of social work. Whether it be this module or another design, it is imperative to enhance the connection to this critical component of the social work profession. Embedding content and experiences within curricula appears to have great potential for facilitating this connection.

References

Birnbaum, M., & Auerbach, C. (1994). Group work in graduate social work education: The price of neglect. *Journal of Social Work Education, 30*(3), 325-335.

Desmond, S., & Symens, A. (1997) Promoting graduate students' membership in professional organizations. *Teaching Sociology, 25*(2), 176-182.

Drumm, K. (2006). The essential power of group work. *Social Work with Groups, 29*(2-3), 17-31.

Eitzen, D. (1988). The introduction of graduate students to the profession of sociology. *Teaching Sociology, 16*, 279-283.

Gonzales, R., & Scarcella, J. (2001). Welcome, technology educators! *Tech Directions, 61*(5), 19-23.

Goodman, H., & Munoz, M. (2004). Developing social group work skills for contemporary agency practice. *Social Work with Groups, 27*(1), 17-33.

Knight, G. (2002). Never too soon: Music ed students at professional conferences. *Teaching Music, 9*(5), 46-50.

Koch, W., & Sancier, B. (1988). Continuing education for school social workers: A learner-friendly model. *Social Work in Education, 10*(2), 122-132.

Kurland, R., Salmon, R., Bitel, M., Goodman, H., Ludwig, K., Newmann, E., et al.. (2004). The survival of social group work: A call to action. *Social Work with Groups*, 27 (1), 3 - 16. Messmer, M. (2005). Counting the benefits of association involvement. *Strategic Finance, 87*(1), 12-14.

Middleman, R. (1990). Group work and the Heimlich maneuver: Unchoking

social work education. In D.F. Fike and B. Rittner (Eds.), *Working From Strengths: The Essence of Group Work.* Miami: Center for Group Work Studies, pp 16-39.

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Simon, S., Webster, J., & Horn, K. (2007). A Critical call: Connecting students and professionals associations. *Social Work with Groups, 30*(4), 5-19.

Sullivan, N. (2006) From the President's pen: Why belong to AASWG? *Social Work with Groups Newsletter, 22*(59), 1-2, 10.

Appendix A
Required readings for course module on professional associations

National Association of Social Workers. *History of NASW.* Retrieved March 7, 2007, from http://www.naswdc.org/nasw/history.asp. Middleman, R. (1998). A brief history of the AASWG. Social Work with Groups Newsletter, 16(1), p. 17. Retrieved from: http://www.aaswg.org/brief-history-aaswg.

Royce, C.A. and Hechtman, J. (2001). Forces at Work: The Top 5 Reasons for Belonging to a Professional Association. *Science Scope,* 24 (6), 28-31.

Simon, S., Webster, J., and Horn, K. (2007). A critical call for connecting students and professional associations. *Social Work with Groups*, 30 (4), 5-19.

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster. Ch.1; Thinking about Social Change in America, pp. 15- 28; Ch. 5; Connections in the Workplace; pp. 83-85; Ch.9; Against the Tide? Small Groups, Social Movement, and the Net, pp.148- 152; Ch. 15; What Killed Civic Engagement? Summing Up; pp.283-284; Ch.20; Health and Happiness; pp. 326- 335.

Appendix B
Professional Association Experience:
Sample Written Assignment

Select a social work/social welfare professional association that interests you, attend a meeting of that organization, and write a (4-6) page paper analyzing your experience utilizing the outline below.

Examples of organizations whose meetings might interest you include National Association of Social Work (NASW), the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG), and the Illinois Group Psychotherapy Society (IGPS). Information about specific meeting times for many social work/social welfare associations will be available from your instructor and via Blackboard. A major objective of this assignment is to enhance your knowledge, experience and appreciation for the role of professional associations as a significant component of your chosen profession, and a potentially supportive community for your ongoing development. Viewing these associations not as bureaucratic organizations, but rather as groups designed to support and enhance one's life work, can be a valuable frame of reference for the new professional. The need to be supported by a community is critical in our contemporary world of isolation and individualization. Moreover, social workers are often subjected to increasing workloads and stress related burn-out, and professional associations provide one vehicle for countering these conditions.

Viewing the meeting through the lens of a group worker, please respond to the following items.

   I. Name of association
  II Date, time and length of meeting
 III Place of meeting
 IV Participants – number, professions, demographics, assigned roles
  V. Type of group and purpose(s) of the meeting (Use Toseland and Rivas's Typologies of Groups)
 VI. Brief summary of the content and structure of the meeting
VII. Assessment of the properties of the group (atmosphere, cohesion, leadership, participation patterns, communication patterns, decision-making processes, sociometric patterns, etc.)
VIII. The therapeutic/helping factors evidenced in the meeting (Use Yalom's therapeutic factors).

IX. Clarity and effectiveness of purpose and the use of time.
X. Reflect upon the potential value and influence of this group/ association on you and your personal/professional aspirations. Consider and respond to the following:
XI. How did you feel as an attendee at the meeting?
XII. What aspects of the meeting did you like? What suggestions for improvement would you make?
XIII. How did your experience relate to *course readings and discussions* including, but *not limited to,* the selections from Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* and other articles in the unit on professional associations? **Note**: Be sure to *link theoretical concepts from class readings to your observations and assessments.*
XIV. Comment on the potential value and influence of this association for you and your personal/professional aspirations and the field of social work.
XV. Concluding comments.