Breaking the Mould in Public Safety Education

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Abstract

The pace of change in our world is unprecedented, and Sheridan College looked to break the mould on how public safety education had been done when it came to creating community safety. This included how we perceive community safety, how students could learn to leave a mark and even how they access knowledge. In this presentation, we discussed the importance of interdisciplinary and inter- professional approaches, and how a zero-textbook approach can facilitate student learning and adaptability.

Introduction

The conversations and perceptions around the topic of community safety in many countries have typically been used as replacement discourse for situational crime prevention (Gilling, 2001). This approach has been viewed as difficult to sustain and ultimately less likely to handle the increasingly interconnected and complex problems our society may encounter (Association of Municipalities of Ontario, 2015; Toronto Police

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Transformational Task Force, 2017). Unfortunately, this model has also been reflected and perpetuated in many of our academic institutions. Programs tend to focus on training students on the criminal justice system as an approach to safety, which means that change to a different model of learning may evolve slowly, or not at all. At Sheridan, the bachelor's degree in Community Safety does not solely focus on policing, or even exclusively the criminal justice system. Not to minimize the importance of crime prevention or understanding the criminal justice system, Sheridan's approach stems from a public health perspective that emphasizes safe communities. This model considers multiple perspectives about what safety means, requiring an integrated, holistic and interdisciplinary lens.

For example, the program takes a macro-approach to understanding global events such as war and terrorism, global warming, resource depletion and financial instability. On the micro-level, courses shape our perceptions of safety around issues surrounding refugee and immigrant communities, cybercrime and recruitment techniques by extremist groups. The presentation highlighted four major skill areas needed within the field of community safety: 1) the ability to build partnerships, 2) differentiated service delivery, 3) understanding the need and process of culture change, and 4) increased need for sustainability and affordability (Association

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of Municipalities of Ontario, 2015; Toronto Police Transformational Task Force, 2017).

Sheridan's focus on public health ensures that the concept of who is involved in the definition of community is considered, which continues to be the empirically recommended approach within the field (Abelson et al., 2007; Conklin, Morris, & Nolte, 2015). In the past, state agencies, such as police, have been given the responsibility for ensuring public safety. With an increasingly diverse population, as well as an emphasis on the global community and fiscal responsibility, it is becoming challenging for one agency to do everything. Further, the history of several traditionally marginalized communities, such as First Nations, LGBTQ, immigrants and refugees, etc., have resulted in a distrust of traditional policing methods. An innovative approach that trains community agencies on safety and prepares police departments to work with stakeholders, empowers both groups to build safe societies. It is likewise important to teach police officers how to work with members of the community. Throughout the Community Safety program, students learn about marginalized communities through projects that focus on equity and inclusivity. Ultimately, this makes the students ready for building and maintaining partnerships necessary within the field of community safety.

According to a quotation often attributed to Einstein, "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them." Most criminal justice and public safety programs emphasize a multidisciplinary approach to training, implying that they will teach some courses on psychology, sociology, law, etc. There is a difference between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. The multidisciplinary approach is less integrative and can be a temporary or weak combination of contributions from multiple disciplines (Borrego & Newswander, 2010; Committee on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research, 2004).

At Sheridan, a multidisciplinary approach has led not only to less integrated solutions, but also to the creation of gaps and duplications of service. In our increasingly globalized and interconnected world, few people can or should work in isolation. Recent generations of college students have tended to be more focused on making a difference and solving complex problems (e.g., poverty, social justice) that will call for increasingly interdisciplinary approaches that work in concert with stakeholders as well as academics from a variety of disciplines (Borrego & Newswander, 2010). This means that, in addition to having courses in sociology, psychology, law, etc., students will have projects that span across classes to facilitate the integration and application of knowledge from various perspectives. It is through this approach that Sheridan seeks to train students on how to look outside their chosen discipline, whether it be police, advocacy, government, in order to integrate safety methods for the application of efficient and inclusive problem-solving. The interdisciplinary approach allows students to address complex problems from a variety of potential career avenues, and ultimately tackle the needs identified as differentiated service delivery.

Another scope of the program is the inclusion of courses in emergency management. Taking a micro-approach to community safety, Sheridan broadens the perceptions of students from simply a crime model to one of emergency preparedness, resiliency, crisis management and incident control. Students have several courses with overlapping assignments requiring them to apply knowledge from the social sciences in handling situations with marginalized or vulnerable communities, such as the evacuation of retirement and long-term care facilities. This expands the scope of students' comprehension and use of differentiated services.

Sheridan places a strong emphasis on research skills development in the program. The intent of this direction is to prepare students to enter a world that requires financial accountability, evidence-based approaches, and an ability to track and evaluate their approach to community safety. Students work with stakeholders to plan and conduct research as well as program evaluation. They design a method to report their research back to

the stakeholders in a way that facilitates discussion with organizational efficiency. While other programs offer some training in basic qualitative methods or basic statistics, this is a unique approach to the field is highly desired by employers.

Sheridan has also sought to engage students through leading and demonstrating the principals of this more community-based and holistic approach. One example discussed during the presentation was methods for increased sustainability and affordability, specifically seeking to remove barriers to accessing course materials by embracing Z-Degree or Z-Cred approach. BCcampus (n.d.) defines a Zed Cred/Z-Degree as "a set of courses in a specific program area that allows a student to earn a credential, such as an associate degree or certificate program, with zero textbook costs by way of using open educational resources and/or free library materials" (BCcampus, n.d.).

Sheridan's Library and Learning Services partnered with the Community Safety program to provide students with alternative course reading materials that cost zero out of pocket through the use of open educational resources, free library materials and print textbook sets for two mandatory courses. Course materials are available on an electronic course reading service (eCOR) where students can access them directly through Sheridan's course management system. The eCOR service gives faculty an opportunity to manage, review, and customize readings based on the course outline. Electronic access to content through linking or posting copyright-compliant copies is offered wherever possible. Regardless, library staff review copyright and licensing restrictions and seek permission to use resources for faculty on their behalf. Files on eCOR are accessible to all students and reviewed for screen reader compatibility. This seamless integration of reading materials into Sheridan's course management system removes cost barriers for students while ensuring content is accessible to all students.

In addition to eCOR, textbook sets were purchased for two elective courses where replacing readings with alternative sources was not feasible. First-year students who enrolled in these two elective courses received one copy of each textbook to keep for the semester. Copies were collected and then stored in the library for the next cohort of students. According to Ontariocolleges.ca (n.d.), students pay approximately $1,300.00 on books and other materials per academic year. The partnership between Library and Learning Services and Community Safety provides students an affordable and sustainable approach to course readings.

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