

# **THE MICMAC BACHELOR OF SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM: POLICY DIRECTION AND DEVELOPMENT**

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## **ABSTRACT/RESUME**

This paper reviews the development and planning process followed in the creation of a special program for the training of Micmac social workers through Dalhousie University in Halifax. The mechanisms developed for policy direction of a program involving interests outside the university and the profession are of particular interest whenever "special" programs or delivery systems are at issue.

Cet article réexamine le processus de développement et de planification qui a été exploité dans l'établissement d'un programme particulier pour la formation des assistants de service social Micmac à l'Université Dalhousie à Halifax. Les mécanismes développés pour la conduite de la politique d'un programme concernant les établissements à l'extérieur de l'université et de la profession éveillent vivement l'intérêt des gens chaque fois que les programmes "spéciaux" sont en jeu.

The development of a culturally relevant social work education program requires active involvement of the community involved. The Micmac Bachelor of Social Work program at Dalhousie University included such community involvement. Once the initial planning was complete, representatives from the Native social agencies involved insisted on maintaining an active role in the program. Consequently a decision-making structure and process evolved to ensure continuous input from Micmac leaders, Native social agency directors and students in an equal relationship with Dalhousie University's Maritime School of Social Work, and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. How this decision-making structure evolved and functioned is discussed below.

## **Historical Development**

The program seeds were sown in 1982 when Micmac community representatives met to discuss the social conditions on Nova Scotia reserves. As a result they identified the need to train social agency counsellors. The counsellors of the newly formed Native social agencies had extensive practical experience, but lacked adequate training. Workshops and seminars had been offered in an attempt to fill the gap, but workers soon realized these workshops were inadequate and worthless for transfer to university credit.

A Planning Committee was formed following the conference to consider credit training options. The Committee included representatives from the Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselling Association (NADACA), the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development's welfare program, the Native Council of Nova Scotia (NCNS) and the Maritime School of Social Work. It looked critically at social work education, as traditionally it has not met the needs of Native people in Canada. Finally it decided to adopt the Maritime School's Bachelor of Social Work after the director assured the committee that adaptations could be made in the curriculum and philosophy.

The main features of the Micmac Bachelor of Social Work Program took shape after numerous planning meetings. The five year degree program had the following objectives:

1. to provide highly relevant and effective education to improve the quality of services provided by social program staff;
2. to provide the staff of social programs with the opportunity to upgrade their personal and professional qualifications;
3. to broaden the capacities of social program staff to include effective preventive and intervention work;

4. to contribute to a cooperative working environment among social program staff;
5. to implement an andragogical teaching approach which recognises the skills and experiences of participants.

The Micmac Bachelor of Social Work program followed the basic components of the Maritime School's accredited professional training program. It consisted of a twenty credit program, with fifteen social work credits and five liberal arts credits. It followed a decentralized format developed by the School for its other part-time, off campus programs in Cape Breton, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. Classes were held for two days, biweekly, and alternated between the Dalhousie campus in Halifax and Sydney, Cape Breton. This allowed the students to continue to work full time for their agencies and to stay with their families, in their home communities.

Students were chosen by their employers, the four sponsoring agencies: the Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselling Association, Micmac Family and Children's Services, the Native Council of Nova Scotia and DIAND's welfare program. Forty-nine students were admitted, for the most part, under Dalhousie's mature students criteria in compliance with the Maritime School's affirmative action policy. Their academic backgrounds varied from grade 9 to a Bachelor's degree, and two-thirds spoke English as a second language.<sup>1</sup>

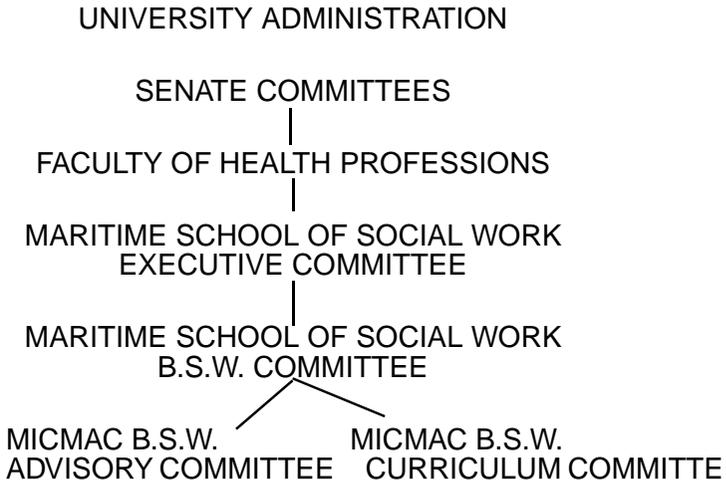
Funding for such a decentralized program proved costly, and all groups had objectives for becoming involved. The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), the largest financial contributor, wanted assurances that money would be well spent. The Micmac social agencies sponsored their employees and consequently paid a portion of the total cost. Therefore agency representatives wanted assurance that curriculum content would be relevant and program policy would take into consideration Micmac culture and traditions. Dalhousie University wanted to maintain academic standards and reap the prestige, with minimal financial commitment.

The effective functioning of the program involved negotiation and cooperative effort on all parts. Initially all scrutinized the program for quality. DIAND was particularly critical and indicated that if numbers fell below fifteen, funding would be withdrawn. However, when quality was assured, they were reassured. Then in 1987 DIAND froze funding; the Advisory Committee challenged the ruling and eventually the necessary funding was received. The community-based committees became more astute at dealing with the university and the professors as the program proceeded. The university remained remote throughout the program while the Maritime School provided ongoing support. A recent Task Force on Access for Black and Native People at Dalhousie reported:

In their (the Micmac) experience, Dalhousie has been responsive to their needs for special professional programmes, but only to the extent that they can secure external funding. Although the university is pleased enough to offer the Bachelor of Social Work for Micmacs and the Certificate Programme for Community Health Representatives — and incidentally, to take public credit for doing so — it is unwilling to commit any of its resources to the education of the Micmac people (MacKay, 1989:93).

### **Adaptation And Policy Direction**

Once the program began in 1984, Micmac leaders maintained active involvement through two program committees: the Advisory Committee and the Curriculum Committee. These committees debated issues and made policy decisions which were passed to the Maritime School's committees as recommendations. Some policy required further approval by Dalhousie's Faculty of Health Professions, the parent faculty, and the Senate. Decisions were not automatically ratified by the Maritime School's committees. However, the relationship was cooperative so the Micmac Bachelor of Social Work committees' decision-making powers have been broad.



The Advisory Committee met four times a year to decide on policy, direction and development. Policy decisions dealt with standards, evaluation, finances, and changes to existing Maritime School policy. For example special permission was necessary when the Committee decided that students should do their first field placements with their employees rather than with mainstream, off-reserve agencies, as the B.S.W. program required. In addition the Committee developed policy direction based upon the experience of other Canadian Native education programs. For this purpose two representatives, one from central and one from western Canada, attended meetings. Other Committee members included Micmac leaders, directors of the sponsoring agencies, students, program and Maritime School faculty.

The Curriculum Committee met monthly to monitor closely the adaptation of philosophy, content and teaching methods. It was also responsible for day-to-day managing, hiring instructors and dealing with student concerns. While adaptations were made, the Committee ensured that the program maintained the B.S.W. standards required by the accreditation body, the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work, so students would be able to work on or off reserve once they graduated. Curriculum Committee members included representatives from the sponsoring agencies, the students, Micmac educators and the program faculty.

The Maritime School's B.S.W. program is based upon Malcolm Knowles' andragogical model of adult education. This recognizes learners as motivated, self-directed, experienced adults (Knowles, 1980). Although the Curriculum Committee promoted individual student fulfillment, it also took into account the needs of the Micmac community and the Native social agencies. Consequently some of the ideas of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, were incorporated. Freire stresses that oppressed peoples must strive for critical consciousness. To achieve this, he says people must understand their own cultural environment, social structures and history; only then can they analyse their present day problems and develop and implement strategies to deal with them (Freire, 1984).

At Curriculum Committee meetings, the appropriateness of mainstream social work approaches and values was questioned and there was ongoing debate over the balance between social work theory and practical skill development. Some Curriculum Committee members wanted practice courses appropriate to their agency's needs, while others felt that the program should not teach specific skills. The challenge was to produce an appropriate combination of skill development and social work knowledge which could bridge both Native and mainstream. This was complicated by the fact that most students had wide practical experience and could, for example, prevent a potential crisis, but were not aware of the theory of crisis intervention.

The historical, legal, cultural and political situation of the Micmac is unique, so courses had to incorporate Native (Micmac when available) materials. The Curriculum Committee's policy was to include curriculum content on Micmac history, and the policies and oppression of the Department of Indian Affairs so students would understand how the Micmac situation had become what it is today. In addition relevant themes taken from everyday life, such as child welfare or the extended family, were covered. English-as-a-Second-Language for academic purposes and study skills instruction were integrated into the courses to assist the students to meet the academic standards and become bilingual.

The Curriculum Committee also stressed the implementation of culturally appropriate teaching methods. Small group discussion allowed students to work cooperatively, sharing views and experiences in Micmac or English. Take home exams gave them time to express their ideas fully. Scarce Micmac materials meant they had to develop the ability to think critically so they could assess the cultural appropriateness and relevance of Native and mainstream materials to their own reserve communities.

Finally the Curriculum Committee screened, interviewed and hired instructors. Native instructors were given priority, and Maritime School faculty members who applied competed with other applicants. Instructors had to meet Dalhousie's requirements of a Master's degree or equivalent and have knowledge of Micmac issues. Once hired, instructors consulted the Committee regularly.

## **University/Community Liaison**

Universities have generally not encouraged community involvement so, for the first time at Dalhousie, Native leaders were involved in policy direction and development. As the program forged new ground, it encountered university regulations that needed to be challenged or revised to meet students' needs. These challenges took many forms and forums, from changing rigid deadlines to adapting existing rules.

The communication, however, had to be a two way process; the university program had to communicate with the broader Micmac community. Because the students were living and working within the community, they became the frontline source of information. In addition a biweekly newsletter kept students and their families up-to-date. *Ekenammaulte'ek*, a review of the developments and events, appeared annually in the Micmac News, the provincial Native newspaper. In the third year, a mid-program evaluation consulted students, committees and agencies in order to ensure the program maintained its focus and changed to meet the needs identified. Finally the Micmac News covered convocation for the first ten graduates.

An informal network also developed between educators in Native programs at Dalhousie and other provincial institutions. Through this

network, experience, expertise and materials were exchanged. On the national level, the number of Native social work education programs has increased annually so a national network has formed to share educational experiences and strategies for challenging university parameters. The Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work formally recognised the importance of this network when it passed guidelines for Native social work education programs in 1988.

## **Conclusion**

Developing a unique and relevant social work program for adult Native students was possible because of the continuous Micmac concern for maintaining standards. The challenge to meet the needs of students, agencies and the Micmac community was immense. The Planning Committee chose to adapt an existing program and incorporate Micmac decision-making into planning, developing policy and adapting curriculum. Others may choose to develop new programs, but the Micmac Bachelor of Social Work provides one alternative which bridged the often inflexible university structure with active community involvement.<sup>2</sup>

## **NOTES**

1. For more information on the Micmac Bachelor of Social Work Programs see Smith and Pace, 1987.
2. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Canadian Ethnic Studies Association Conference, Halifax, Nova Scotia, October 1987.

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