system, and questions whether the probation service is the appropriate agency to undertake such work. This study does remind us of the need for any exploratory projects to have an integral research element, and although the extent of it, in this case, is limited, the value of ongoing research evaluation is clearly demonstrated.

REFERENCES


SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION (Colin Whittington)


Many schools of social work are not effective in recruiting minority students. Most of this is due, says the article, to inadequate planning. Activities to recruit minorities are not viewed as central to the school’s mission with the result that recruitment efforts are not well planned or properly staffed and financed. Poor planning creates a negative image that in turn undermines recruitment.

A well-planned programme of recruitment and retention activities rests on a number of principles. First, the activities must include the institution’s majority populace, that is, white administrators, teachers and students should take on visible and active roles. Underlying this is a judgement that minority recruitment is fundamentally a political issue involving redistribution of resources. Consequently, the concurrence of the institution’s power holders, typically white, is required. Secondly, the activities should not depend solely or primarily on active minority participation. Otherwise, if minority status coincides with junior position the institutional prestige of the programme may seem to be lowered. Furthermore, people from minorities may object to the assumption that they should staff such activities, arguing that it represents a narrowing of their own career paths.

A third principle is that minority recruitment programmes should be designed to develop links with the social networks and organizations of which minority recruits are a part. Fourthly, these programmes must include active service components which demonstrate an awareness of the potential financial and
domestic implications of a decision to take a course. Finally, minority recruitment will be more likely to succeed if retention activities are planned as part of recruitment. The capacity to attract candidates is greatly affected by what happened to their predecessors.

The programme also needs a framework to structure the planning and implementation processes. This can be summarized as having six phases. Phase one gauges the environment and climate for mounting a recruitment and retention plan and is followed by Pre-initiation which involves the development of a support structure within and beyond the institution. The third phase consists of Programme Planning and Development in which the detailed design of recruitment and retention plans is undertaken. Implementation ensues and is followed by Evaluation in terms of the following objectives: the development of minority support networks, improvement of the school’s image among the target groups and their support systems, and increases in the numbers of recruited and graduating minority students. The sixth phase, Institutionalization, entails the establishment of the programme in the school’s structure and goals. Recruitment and retention programmes such as this require commitment of resources for an extended period.

**COMMENT**

Articles on subjects as important as this one tend to polarize reactions. One view welcomes the serious, creative project described and the work to define and elaborate its key elements which have been applied in a three-year recruitment programme. Another view looks critically at the conception and content of the principles described, asks why discussion of race and racism does not appear and questions some of the paper’s other basic assumptions. In my own view, both positions require a hearing though it can be predicted that the perceived shortcomings of the paper will receive more attention and less forgiving treatment from readers than might be the case with less important subjects.

Planning is hardly a sufficient condition for success—can Oliver and Brown really mean that lack of planning is the main cause of failure to recruit minority students?—but the paper does show that systematic planning is necessary and illustrates tasks for each stage. The authors do not offer a blue-print, arguing that principles and planning models may vary with the characteristics of schools and personnel. This implies a surprising conception of principles as situational when one might expect here a statement of fundamentals. At a number of points Oliver and Brown properly suggest that the recruitment of minorities should be declared and resourced at the highest level. In what circumstances would this not be required?

Looking at their first principle, they seem to have conflated two important variables: participation of representatives of the majority population and participation of those with institutional power. While the latter may be synonymous with the former, the reverse may not be true. Furthermore, one wonders how the conjunction of their first and second principles worked out in practice. Was there ever a risk of there being few or even no participants from minority groups? It
does not appear so from the article, but the possibility leads one to look for a principle suitably phrased to avoid that eventuality. The other principles, concerned with developing links with minority networks and providing active support systems, seem very sound.

As far as the planning framework is concerned, the abstract above gives only a limited idea of the important planning issues and tasks for recruitment and support identified by Oliver and Brown. One imagines that there is more to know, however, about the processes that the three year programme entailed. A task-oriented planning model does not show to those wishing to pursue similar objectives, the argument and debate, the ideologies and interests that stood revealed or the consensus, conflict and bargaining that arose. On the other hand, the paper does report some very interesting results. Taking each of the three project years in turn, enrolment of graduate candidates from minority groups, principally Black and Hispanic students, were 4.43 per cent, 9.61 per cent and 8.41 per cent; a welcome improvement in relative terms but not startling given the low first year base. On the other hand, undergraduate minority enrolment, the feeder for future graduate enrolment, increased steadily from ten per cent to over forty-five per cent in the same period. These figures represent a total of fifty-eight graduate students, of whom all but two completed, and fifty undergraduates, of whom forty-nine completed. Recruitment and retention figures for subsequent years will be awaited with great interest.


Harrison and Thyer argue that research dissertations on ‘social work practice’ should be defined by their direct application to the improvement of practice methods. Social work, they say, is a profession which is concerned with the practical matters of helping people and social work research should focus upon practitioners and their effectiveness. In short, the authors are advocates of ‘outcome research’. Furthermore, they insist that such research must be undertaken by experimental or quasi-experimental methods which offer the most valuable scientific approach to testing social work interventions. Outcome research is contrasted by the authors with ‘non-outcome’ studies which are, they say, concerned with description, exploration, process, hypothesis development or theory testing. Reviewing doctoral dissertations, Harrison and Thyer found that research concerned with interventive outcomes and employing experimental design had a relatively low representation. They see this as an imbalance that needs to be changed. Rejecting criticisms of the cause–effect paradigm, they argue together with Paul that ‘it is precisely through outcome studies with concurrent measurement or manipulation of variables whose influence is unknown that important variables are likely to be identified’ (p. 109).
COMMENT

It is not essential to share the authors' absolute faith in experimental method or their vision of a social work practice which deals in 'interventive technology', to join them in their concern for research into what social workers do and its effects. Equally, one sympathizes with their arguments for improved training in research methods. More debatable are their efforts to make experimental design the method for outcome research and to establish experimental outcome studies as pre-eminent. They appear to disconnect practice from theory and to imply that definitions of practice are unproblematic. Alternatively, these issues are taken to be outside the province of practice research. As for the relation of political and economic conditions and priorities to the types and objectives of practice (and research) that may be conducted, this is evidently not a matter for the writers of practice dissertations. To lose sight of these connections, whether at post-qualifying or at qualifying levels (cf. Humphries, 1988, p. 4), is a serious matter. Presumably, it will not be open to students pursuing practice research within Harrison and Thyer's agenda to examine the authors' own argument that what they recommend is a necessary strategy in an 'era of shrinking resources and increasing pressures towards demonstrating effectiveness' (p. 111).

REFERENCE


This study reports how male and female appraisers evaluate male and female applicants in recommendation letters (references) to a social work master's degree programme. It is based on recommendation letters affecting ninety applicants, forty-five men and forty-five women, who were admitted to the programme over a five or six year period and represent ninety per cent of the total admitted for that period. Content analysis was carried out on 266 letters which were separated into four groups: male evaluations of male applicants; male evaluations of female applicants; female evaluations of male applicants; and female evaluations of female applicants. A total of 945 personal qualities were identified and grouped into five major categories: intellect, leadership, motivation (energy and drive towards work and service), psychosocial development (emotional and social stability) and social relationship traits (demeanour, manner and presentation). The 266 letters came from 202 (seventy-six per cent) male appraisers and sixty-four (twenty-four per cent) female appraisers. The majority were college teachers, agency supervisors or administrators. Male applicants selected 113 male appraisers to twenty-five female, while female applicants chose eighty-nine males to thirty-nine females.

The recommendation form asked: 'What makes this candidate outstanding and
especially promising among applicants who may appear equally qualified? The characteristic most frequently mentioned by appraisers, male and female, was social relationships; the one mentioned least was leadership. Within this overall picture, male appraisers mentioned intellect, leadership and motivation more often for male applicants than for female applicants (intellect M: fourteen per cent, F: twelve per cent; leadership M: thirteen per cent, F: ten per cent; motivation M: twenty-six per cent, F: twenty-two per cent). Psychosocial development and social relationship traits were referred to more often to describe females (psychosocial development F: twenty-three per cent, M: twenty-one per cent; social relations F: thirty-two per cent, M: twenty-five per cent). Women appraisers also mentioned intellect (M: fifteen per cent, F: thirteen per cent) and leadership (M: thirteen per cent, F: twelve per cent) more often for men than for women applicants. Again, they referred to psychosocial development more for women (F: twenty-five per cent, M: twenty-three per cent) but reference to social relations traits was almost even (F: thirty-one per cent, M: thirty per cent).

Theorizing briefly on the nature of gender and gender-differences, the author concludes that both sets of appraisers described applicants through the same stereotypical views of gender and that gender-based differences do exist in letters of recommendation.

COMMENT

If equal opportunities are to become a reality it is essential to monitor and research the obstacles and biases that may be built into our taken-for-granted systems. This paper provides an illustration of how one element of a system can be identified and examined. It also shows some of the difficulties involved in such research and in responding to it. Leaving aside the paper’s references to particular gender theory, no small matter in formulating equal opportunities but not explored in detail in the paper, there are points for debate both in the methodology and in some of the author’s interpretation. A commentary that concentrates on such matters can be distorting in its effects even though not obstructive in its intent. On the other hand, research conclusions aimed at individual or institutional change clearly need to be as well-founded as possible. This is as much a matter of strategy as of scholarship.

Of course, attempts to account for all the likely variables can rapidly lead to the collapse of a study under its own weight. Even so, there are some considerations that could be important in making sense of the system which Seipel has chosen to investigate. One is that we do not know how the writers of the recommendations defined their tasks, what guidance they were given or what they thought would most help the candidates they were supporting. Another is that we do not have information on the values and priorities of the selectors. Thirdly, bearing in mind that the letters analysed were those for students who were admitted, what might we learn from an analysis of recommendations for candidates who were rejected? In terms of the finding that social relationships were referred to the most and leadership the least by both male and female appraisers, may we be looking at a bias among selectors rather than appraisers, or perhaps both?

Seipel is undoubtedly correct in his stricture that reference letters should not
contain sexist language or gender-biased labels. In his advice that terms like 'delightful' or 'cute' to describe female applicants may not be useful to the selection committee and may denigrate the applicant, he seems to be a master of understatement.

Note. The 'Comment' sections of Social Work Education Abstracts express the views of the author and are not necessarily those of CCETSW.