

FORUM SECTION

Skills Training in Family Studies An Argument for Augmentation

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"Family Science Undergraduate Programs: Time For A New Approach?," (Brock, 1987) presents a curriculum approach focusing on "skills training" as a solution to the following assumed deficits in Family Science undergraduate programs: a) The lack of a clear-cut occupational identity, b) An insufficient amount of professional training, c) Declining numbers of undergraduate majors, and d) A career path which is not economically competitive. Noting that new approaches to therapy are assuming forms which focus more on "...prevention services, educational intervention, psychoeducation....", the author suggests that family science departments will benefit from using similar "skill training" emphases as a new model for curriculum development.

The purpose of this "rejoinder" is not to provide an argument against the inclusion of "skills training" *per se*, but rather to raise some important issues about goals and methods: some of which the Brock (1987) article seems to ignore and others of which have the potential to cause severe problems in the future.

A COMPARISON OF THE SKILLS TRAINING AND CLASSICAL FAMILY STUDIES CURRICULUM

The "skills training curriculum" presented in the Brock (1987) article includes four major components. Students begin with four theory courses in child and human development, courtship and mate selection, marriage and family development, and family systems. These are followed by a second component which focuses on program design, implementation, evaluation and basic helping skills. The third component consists of twenty "...specific, well-tested, and effective skills training programs" (such as STEP, PET, Relationship Enhancement, etc.). The fourth and final component consists of practicum placements in the community.

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It is clear that the approach suggested above differs drastically from the more classical family science curriculum and that the former approach has much more emphasis on learning occupational skills. The present author is concerned that the proposed approach has too much emphasis on a skills approach and that it suffers from an inordinate concern with "vocationalism." Consider the following potential problems.

Most classical family science curricula require students to begin with courses titled "Introduction to...," which are survey courses focusing on family relationships, child development, family economics and management, etc. These courses typically are followed by more advanced courses in each area which, like the introductory courses, are also of a survey nature but include fewer topics which are covered in greater depth. In the curriculum model presented by Brock, these survey courses are omitted on the grounds they contain "...content and little else." Instead, it is suggested that the student begin his or her involvement in family science with a theory course in each area. The issue of whether students can understand a "theory of..." course without ever having taken any survey courses is not addressed, but the issue is clearly worth considering.

The second component of the proposed "skills training" curriculum includes three courses which essentially are applied research design courses and a fourth which focuses on "basic helping/counseling skills." Compared to the more classical approach, which provides the student with one general research methods course in their junior or senior year, this component would seem to be an improvement in that it would provide more realistic support for the probability that Family Science majors are eventually going to be involved in grant-writing activities as a part of their future job placements. To the present author, this component could be a real "step forward" in comparison to the more traditional curriculum.

While the first component's emphasis on "theory" differs drastically from the "survey" involvement in current use and the second component expands current emphases on research skills, it is the third component's emphasis on "skills training" which provides the most radical departure from traditional family science undergraduate programs. In Brock's article it is not clear whether the specific skill areas included here are intended to be courses or emphases within courses, but the supposed "specific skills" do constitute the bulk of his proposed curriculum in that they outnumber all other topics by a two-to-one margin. Functionally, the nature of the proposed skills training curriculum becomes very clear in this component: It is a proposal which emphasizes vocational training to its utmost. The issue of whether family science majors who have mastered twenty specific skill areas will be able to use this mastery as an adequate foundation for graduate school is not addressed. The issue is critical, however, because it is precisely in this area that the classical approach in family science has been strongest. If a skills training emphasis results in a program providing a terminal vocational degree at the undergraduate level, one can raise the issue of whether such a program would result in "progress" and whether it would indeed result in increased numbers of undergraduate majors. The present author's experience is that most undergraduate students would prefer a program that would provide a good foundation for later graduate education over one which would not provide such a basis.

ISSUES RELATING TO CURRICULUM CHANGE

Although the present author is less than enthusiastic about some of the above noted curriculum emphases and more enthusiastic about others, the suggestions about how family science curricula can be changed constitute an extremely problematic

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dimension of the proposed skills training emphasis. One major issue relates to the question of whether the suggested changes should "replace" the classical approach or "augment" it. Since all of the suggested change mechanisms mentioned in the Brock (1987) article relate to the former rather than the latter, the reader can assume that Dr. Brock is at least seriously exploring a "replacement" approach if he is not yet actually advocating it. For example, the article suggests that "...the above curriculum could replace or augment existing family science degree programs." It also points out,

"...intervention faculty in most departments have well developed talents useful in skills training programs. Where such expertise is not present, consultants can teach existing faculty to lead these programs in a very short time... There is no reason to assume that the low cost expertise needed to train students does not exist."

Functionally, the above suggestions imply that "non-intervention faculty" can "replace" their current courses with one introductory theory course and be trained by consultants to be a source of "low cost expertise" in skills training. The impact on research and morale of "non-interventionist" faculty in human development, family relations, and family economics and management is not addressed, but the present author believes it could be devastating. It also is extremely important to note that most family science departments include far greater numbers of "content-oriented" faculty than "intervention-oriented" faculty. The prospect of retraining the former to provide "low cost expertise" in a program where content courses are replaced with "skills training" courses would seemingly remove undergraduate students from content involvement in teachers' major areas of expertise.

AN ARGUMENT FOR AUGMENTATION

Brock's (1987) article points out some potential problem areas in family science programs but, as family therapists frequently point out (Laing, 1972, p. 105), the proposed "solution" might very well be more problematic than the original problem. The present author believes that the suggested emphasis on replacing content courses with skills training courses and the retraining of non-intervention faculty could result in a loss of extremely valuable teaching and research resources. On the other hand, an "augmented" approach could combine the best elements of the newer "skills training" model and the classical model.

Instead of *replacing* content courses with skill training, the latter dimension could simply be added to the former where most appropriate. Relevant skills training also could be explicitly presented and carefully monitored on a departmental level. The result could be that relevant content courses also would include one or two important components of "skill training." Such an "augmented" approach would allow the retention of introductory and advanced survey courses on an "augmented-enriched" basis rather than a "replacement" basis and thus allow undergraduate students to learn important skills *and* sufficient content for eventual graduate school involvement.

A most interesting dimension of Brock's suggestions relates to the applied research (section B) dimension of the proposed curriculum. The present author believes this component would provide the best entree for a *combination* of "theory" and "applied research methods." The inclusion of theory at the beginning of the Junior year (rather than at the beginning of the program) would insure that students are not memorizing summary theoretical statements in the form of "slogan systems," since students would have had a sufficient number of content courses before their involvement at the theory

level. In addition, a combination of "theory" and "applied research" would seem to link two important components which do indeed have a natural relationship to each other and which, if mastered, could set family science undergraduates apart from many other social science majors.

SUMMARY

In summary, it appears to the present author that an "augmented" approach to the inclusion of "skills training" in family science departments has advantages which far outweigh the more radical "replacement" approach. In addition, the present author would like to conclude with several hypotheses which conflict with the assumptions which are stated in Dr. Brock's article. To wit:

1. Psychology undergraduates might not be more occupationally identified than family science students. While the word psychology (after 100 years) has more name recognition than family science, the job market might be more controlled by funds, perceived social and agency needs, and applicant abilities than by name recognition.
2. The behavioral dimensions of therapeutic skills may be quickly acquired on a "low cost" basis which may even include mere behavioral imitation. Their valid application and expert practice, however, may require considerable background knowledge, expertise, practice and important cognitive and emotional supports.
3. The great majority of "family science" departments might include much more than "family intervention programs" and the former dimensions may be as real, vital, and potentially useful to the future of "family science" as the latter.

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