Scaffolding Family Science Student Experiences to Increase Employment Options and Preparedness

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ABSTRACT. This paper describes how undergraduate curriculum in family science can engage with partners in the community to prepare millennial students more effectively for employment in their chosen fields. Students begin the three-course process in a Professional Development course that serves as the foundation for translating classes to the community. The process culminates in an applied internship experience that facilitates a direct transition into the workforce through improved professionalism and self-presentation skills. The scaffolding results in increased competence, confidence, and experience for students. These qualities positively impact their intentionality in the classroom and the application of knowledge in applied environments.

Keywords: professional development, internships, community engagement

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In a collegiate environment, it is important that undergraduate students apply and disseminate their knowledge in real-world settings. This is particularly true for students in human development and family science (Ballard & Carroll, 2005). However, employers of "millennial" students increasingly report that recent graduates do not have enough experience and neither employers nor graduates themselves feel they have the confidence to succeed in the workplace. According to a survey by McKinsey & Company (2013), 45% of four-year-college graduates work in jobs that do not require a college degree and one-third of graduates said they did not think college had fully prepared them to enter the working world. Psychology and other social sciences/humanities graduates report a similar trend in their first year of employment. When compared to students in nursing/allied health, business, engineering/technology, and education, social science students report they are securing first-year employment in positions that are less likely to require degrees, less likely to be related to their majors, and have lower salaries (Rajecki & Borden, 2009).

If students and employers report lack of preparedness, then undergraduate programs need to revisit their curricula to a) provide experiences that will increase workplace preparedness and b) enable students to practice communicating with potential employers about their experiences. The economic climate is shifting positively, but what does that mean specifically for millennial students entering the workforce in human services? How can programs adequately address students and employers' needs while pursuing core objectives?
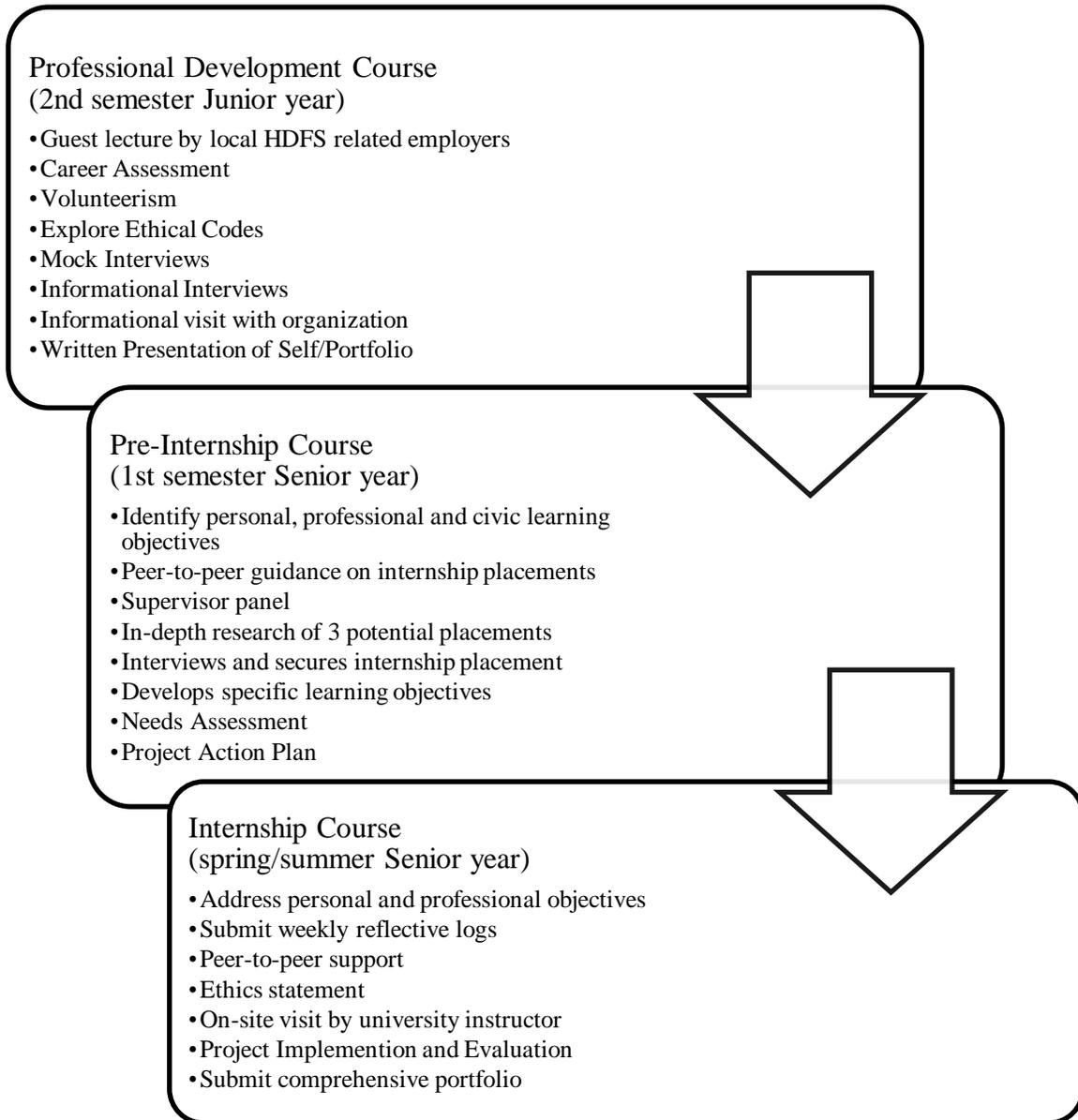
Understanding Students: The Millennial Generation

The Millennial generation is changing the climate of undergraduate instruction. Students born between 1982 and 2000 (Gen Y or Millennials: Howe & Strauss, 2000) are asking for more opportunities to engage directly with the material and pushing faculty to constantly engage them in the learning process, using diverse methods of instruction that go beyond lectures (Monaco & Martin, 2007). Students also want more connections between classrooms and the real world, but human services students are often unaware of available options. To address Millennials' stated desires to have their learning experiences tailored specifically to them, we describe how our department establishes a clear path from professional development to pre-internship to internship with intentional assignments and opportunities that enable individualization of the experience (Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010) while maintaining academic rigor (See Figure 1. Overview of curriculum preparing students for employment.).

Constructing the Foundation: Professional Development Course

Until recently, the only opportunity students in our department had for exploring Human Development and Family Science related careers, employment opportunities, and professionalism skills was available through the Professional Development course. We

noticed that students who took this course early in their academic careers found that the information was either outdated or that they had forgotten it by the time they needed it. Alternately, some students needed these skills for applying to graduate school or for interviewing, but they missed opportunities to learn about the process if they took the course late in their academic careers. Consequently, the information was available too late to benefit them.

Professional Development Course
(2nd semester Junior year)
• Guest lecture by local HDFS related employers
• Career Assessment
• Volunteerism
• Explore Ethical Codes
• Mock Interviews
• Informational Interviews
• Informational visit with organization
• Written Presentation of Self/Portfolio

Pre-Internship Course
(1st semester Senior year)
• Identify personal, professional and civic learning objectives
• Peer-to-peer guidance on internship placements
• Supervisor panel
• In-depth research of 3 potential placements
• Interviews and secures internship placement
• Develops specific learning objectives
• Needs Assessment
• Project Action Plan

Internship Course
(spring/summer Senior year)
• Address personal and professional objectives
• Submit weekly reflective logs
• Peer-to-peer support
• Ethics statement
• On-site visit by university instructor
• Project Implemention and Evaluation
• Submit comprehensive portfolio

Figure 1. Overview of curriculum preparing students for employment. This figure represents the sequence and activities in the three-course curriculum that prepares students to enter the workforce.

Conscious of the need for structure in building student employment opportunities and their abilities to access them, the Professional Development course is now a pre-requisite for the newly established Internship course requirement. Students are advised to take the Professional Development course during the end of their junior year because they have completed enough course content in substantive areas to start the process of identifying careers. This course ensures students have fully explored populations with whom they may work, and workplace environments where they may work. The course also teaches students skills they need to present themselves well during interviews and through written materials (résumés, cover letters, e-mail etiquette, etc.). As described below, students begin to build professional networks by engaging with local professionals and the community.

The Professional Development course begins the process through which students make connections between their HDFS coursework and their employment. To meet the course objective of providing introductions to various family science professions, instructors invite local employers to guest lecture about HDFS-related career opportunities and students complete a Career Assessment assignment. In the Career Assessment, students assess their own strengths, weaknesses, and preferences, and complete research profiles of at least two positions identified through the *Careers Serving Families and Consumers* (Sproles & Sproles, 2000) or *Careers in Family Science* (NCFR, 2009) to explore potential career options.

Students' initial explorations of career opportunities provide the basis for career-relevant interactions with the community over the course of the semester. For example, students identify a local organization that fits his or her goals and strengths based on results of the Career Assessment; they also determine how their current levels of knowledge and experience can shape their involvement. Students then volunteer with the identified organization throughout the semester for a minimum of 30 hours (approximately two hours per week).

As part of their coursework, students also form groups with those who have similar career aspirations and are asked to identify an additional organization that would be an appropriate employer. Students visit the organization as a group to gather materials, interview key hiring personnel, and tour the facility. The group then present information on the HDFS-related community agency to the class.

Students continue to practice self-presentation and interview skills through the Informational Interviews with professionals employed in the fields and/or in positions students have identified through their Career Assessments. Students are able to learn more about day-to-day activities related to their preferred fields through this experience and through Informational Interviews with graduate students or graduates who are employed. This provides students valuable knowledge on the transition from student to employee, often clarifying for them employers' expectations from someone who was recently in their shoes.

The Professional Development course allows students to self-select experiences that meet departmental and course learning objectives and begin linking those objectives to their academic work across the curriculum. In the process, students also identify standards of professional behavior (ethical codes) unique to their chosen professions and are encouraged to join professional organizations such as the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or other organizations that allow undergraduate student membership.

Students document the above information and experiences in portfolios that they submit as their final projects. These portfolios become the basis for an ongoing record of students' career relevant activities, contacts in the community, application of coursework, and burgeoning skill sets. Students continue to document their career related experiences and academic accomplishments throughout the remaining two steps toward a Final Portfolio that is submitted upon completion of their internship experience. We believe this method enables students to intentionally apply all of their course work knowledge not only to their internship, but also to other real-world environments they identify as important to their future careers.

This type of course or attention to professional development skills helps students transition to thinking about their professional development outside of the grades they earn in their coursework. These experiences also provide a wealth of opportunities for students to either explore the potential employment options available, to expose those who are unsure about their career path, or to make connections to employers for those who have an established career plan.

Departments that do not have Professional Development courses can still address student needs to connect coursework to specific careers through departmental events and campus resources. For example, the department could regularly schedule panel discussions of local HDFS-related employers or incorporate these employers as guest lecturers into courses to introduce students to potential careers and work environments. Students also can be advised to seek résumé review and professional communication guidance from the campus career services office. Such offices often conduct mock interviews to further assist students in their self-presentation skills. Lastly, departments can promote the skill of learning to document one's experiences and accomplishments by having a portfolio requirement that is not bound to a particular class, but rather as an exit interview component.

Regardless of how students begin the process of thinking in terms of careers versus coursework, either through a course or through other departmental events, they will continue the process through exploring specific career options, gaining experience, or building connections to the professional community. In our department, all students continue this process through participating in an internship experience.

Building the Structure: Internships

In the human services field, internships are important for providing students with direct experiences necessary to determine their career paths (Ballard & Carroll, 2005; Prouty, Johnson, & Protinsky, 2000; Stone & McLaren, 1999). For some students this means they are (dis)confirming their paths, while others are still exploring their options. In some cases, internships are recruitment tools for graduate programs or employers (Ballard & Carroll, 2005; Prouty, Johnson, & Protinsky, 2000). Although students learn about career options through some of the activities noted previously, they cannot yet fully comprehend what it means to be a therapist, Family Life Educator, caseworker, advocate, or the many other career options available to them as Family Science students. In many ways, supervisors and mentors provide direct guidance and support based on their breadth of expertise that instructors at the university are unable to provide. However, if departments develop mutually beneficial relationships with local agencies and organizations, then it is a win-win situation. Instructors provide outsider perspectives by encouraging students to think beyond their immediate experiences and into their futures. Internship supervisors provide workplace support and guide students towards their personal and professional learning goals.

Pre-Internship Course

Students are advised to enroll in the Pre-Internship course during their senior year to prepare them for applied experiences in diverse settings across the human services field. At this point in their program, the primary objective for students is to seek and secure a work experience while learning about professional development, ethics, and other relevant topics.

Additionally, Human Development and Family Science students are able to graduate with Provisional Family Life Educator Certification (FLE), which represents their ability to disseminate knowledge in various applied settings. The culmination of students' FLE coursework is the required internship experience that enables them to observe and experience the ten Content Areas: Families and Individuals in Societal Contexts; Internal Dynamics of Families; Human Growth and Development Across the Lifespan; Human Sexuality; Interpersonal Relationships; Family Resource Management; Parent Education and Guidance; Family Law and Public Policy; Professional Ethics and Practice; and Family Life Education Methodology (Bredehoft & Cassidy, 1995; NCFR, 2007).

At the start of the course, students complete a reflective assignment where they begin to identify personal, professional, and civic learning objectives that build on *Career Assessments* they completed in the Professional Development course. To learn about possible internship placements, students first read lists of acceptable placements that meet a wide variety of student interests. Next, students meet individually with the internship coordinator to discuss their internship and career goals. This meeting enables the coordinator to help students narrow down their lists of options that may include internship placements that are not on the departmental list. Each semester, approximately

10% of students propose new internship placements, so the internship coordinator works closely with them to assess the availability and applicability.

Within the first month of the pre-internship course, current and former internship students participate in a panel to share stories of their journeys and provide peer-to-peer guidance on topics related to finding the right placements, balancing coursework and internships, and transitioning from internships to careers. This information also exposes students to the types of placements they may choose. Based on student feedback following the student panel, pre-internship students frequently report decreases in anxiety and fear related to their abilities to find and secure internships after hearing their peers openly discuss conquered fears and exciting opportunities.

During the pre-internship course, students continue to self-report anxiety concerning their roles and supervisor expectations. To address this anxiety, past and potential supervisors participate in a panel to discuss such issues. In addition to continued exposure to placements, students also have opportunities to talk to supervisors in non-stressful, low-pressure environments. After exposure to various options, students conduct in-depth research on three potential internship placements to understand the mission, objectives, and services offered. Students also describe placement structures (non-profit, business, government agency, etc.) to understand guidelines, operations, and professional organization affiliations. Based on agency research, students develop a learning plan that serves as a starting point for determining their personal objectives in their internships, and for understanding how the departmental objectives are addressed.

After selection of goals that best match their internship placements, students begin preparations to secure the internships. The first step in this process involves students contacting someone in a supervisorial role to shadow or interview for a significant part of a day. Next, to prepare for interviews, students review and revise résumés and cover letters they drafted in their Professional Development courses. After an interview occurs, students provide their supervisors with their learning plans and applications so that they can co-create internship responsibilities that meet these objectives, as well as those that the placements need. To receive formal approval of internship placements, students complete applications that require them to describe how Human Development and Family Science courses have prepared them for the internships, and how the placements will enable them to observe or experience FLE Content Areas.

Based on the similarity of the internship placement, students are grouped to provide peer support as students continue to research the placement, revise the learning plan, and develop a project action plan. During this process, students perform a needs assessment so they know the difference between what they *think* the community needs and what the community *actually* needs. Students engage with their future internship supervisors, as well as other internship stakeholders to complete the assessment. This becomes part of the students' development of an extensive learning plan that incorporates their personal learning goals, departmental objectives, and community needs.

To apply FLE principles, assignments focus on multiple modes of writing for diverse audiences, e.g. academic settings, social media, applied settings and private vs. public communication. This will inform the project that a student proposes to accomplish during their internship. The student writes an action plan for implementation during the internship experience.

Internship

During the Internship, the departmental objectives are that all students learn analytic skills, program development, communication skills, professional development and application of academic knowledge. To accomplish these, students complete weekly assignments and reflections. Students address their personal and professional objectives developed in the Pre-Internship course as they work with supervisors to ensure that they not only apply course knowledge, but also learn new information not necessarily gained in a classroom (Stone & McLaren, 1999). Students are expected to translate the internship-specific knowledge into their final projects and portfolios.

During the Internship, students communicate consistently with the instructor and their peers through an online private forum that enables them to submit assignments and participate in a discussion board. In their daily lives, students are increasingly interconnected through technology. The online forum also serves as a space for internship students to sustain their connections with each other and the university to develop community spaces where they can socialize and converse about their daily activities (Chu, Chan, & Tiwari, 2012).

Another method to maintain connection between the student and the university occurs through one to two meetings on-campus with the instructor. The meetings also ensure that the students remember departmental objectives and knowledge application. To further maintain that connection, the instructor visits each student's internship site at midterm to meet with the supervisor and discuss strengths, weaknesses, and future plans. These meetings also facilitate the development of partnerships between the HDFS Department and local agencies.

The weekly assignments that students submit online build on work they completed in the Pre-Internship course. Students also consistently develop elements of their projects throughout the experience, working directly with their supervisors and/or colleagues to ensure that the objectives are applicable and appropriate for the organization or clientele. Students also receive and give feedback from and to their peers, respectively. Studies examining this interaction demonstrate that this process enables students to engage in higher-order thinking and constructive feedback (Chu, Chan, & Tiwari, 2012). As they implement the action plan developed during the Pre-Internship course, students document the experience so they can evaluate the plan at the end of the experience. Next, students present their internship projects and evaluations to their instructors and peers as a culminating internship experience.

Along with final write-ups that evaluate their community-based plans, students also review portfolios they developed in Professional Development and incorporate

various representations of work they completed during their internships. Compiling comprehensive portfolios enables students to capture the breadth and depth of work they have done as part of their coursework and internships. From our perspective and of others in the field, the portfolio procedure not only serves as another way for students to make connections between coursework and experience, but also is valuable for instructors and supervisors to assess their abilities (Lanigan, 2008). Work included in portfolios could be professional development trainings, conferences, workshops, or other documents they develop. In these ways, we hope students will explore themselves, their placements, and the communities to enhance their futures.

The path from the Pre-Internship course to the Internship provides clear connections between learning goals, assessment activities, and learning activities, which are elements of Fink's (2003) Integrated Course Design. This plan guides students towards internship experiences that represent service learning because they are better prepared to learn in and from communities they enter during their internships. Upon completion of their internships, students are prepared to enter careers or graduate studies in human services.

Programs that do not require internships or do not have pre-internship courses can still provide this level of structure to facilitate transition of student thinking toward that of an employee. One way of achieving this outside of an internship program would be to incorporate assignments in required courses that ask students to identify local agencies or organizations where they might seek employment or that address issues relevant to course content. Instructors can also invite representatives from local agencies into their classrooms more frequently to demonstrate to students how the material they learn is directly applicable in the community. A more in-depth component would require students to interview or "shadow" someone employed by the identified agency or organization. Incorporation of service learning assignments and projects into curricula is another way for students to engage in their community around issues relevant to their chosen career fields. Creating partnerships between the program and community leaders or local organizations serving individuals and families will increase opportunities for student interactions with potential employers and encourage exploration of workplace environments. Incorporation of these community leaders and organizations into courses or departmental events will also increase student awareness of careers related specifically to their majors and will provide students with models of professional networking and community engagement processes. Instructors may choose to develop service learning courses in partnership with local agencies after identifying specific needs in the community that students can help address.

Flying the Coop: Student to Employee
The common threads woven from the Professional Development course to the Pre-Internship course and into the Internship enable students to enter the workforce prepared and confident. Based on data from the most recent cohort's final evaluation surveys, about 81.5% of supervisors from the past year say they would *definitely hire* the student if a position were available. As reported by graduates on a final evaluation survey, employment outcomes in the past year indicated that 24% of students are now

employed in agencies where they completed their internships. Based on student tracking data, these student outcomes indicate the value of the internship experience as a method for students to use and learn about networking opportunities to improve their chances for employment. On their final evaluations, students reported feeling more confident in their career paths regardless of whether or not they received job offers. These students also firmly believe that experiences provided in their internships directly influenced and guided their futures.

Institutional attention to connecting students' tailored experiences across several semesters provides the structure for ongoing professional development. Students develop competence and confidence through this process, which empowers them to communicate their job preparedness and skill sets to employers more readily and enables them to better self-advocate and explain what FLE and CFLE mean. Through this process, students cultivate the habits of documenting their professional activities and maximizing their employment options upon graduation.

To implement a similar curriculum in other family science departments, faculty need to begin by assessing student and community needs. Understanding student perceptions and expectations about how their professional development impacts their future careers will help inform curriculum implementation. If community agencies are going to host students, it is also important to understand their perceptions and expectations of the students' professional skills. This also facilitates development of relationships between the department and community organizations that serve individuals and families. Departments also need to develop concept maps of their curricula to determine what methods of course progression are most appropriate and to evaluate those areas across the curricula that can address professional development but are not currently utilized.

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