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COUNSELING RE-ENTRY WOMEN: A STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF HELPING PROFESSIONALS

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Helping professionals in various settings provide a view of re-entry women as persons with special needs and concerns. Related counseling approaches and programs are examined. Recommendations for future program design are offered.

A continuing trend in American society is the increasing participation of women in the work force. In 1981, women made up 43% of the total work force, demonstrating a steady growth from 38.2% in 1971 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1982). Women 25 to 44 years old accounted for most of this growth. Some of these women are re-entering the work force after an extended absence. In a federally funded study for the Women's Re-entry Project, Weinstein (1980) reported that re-entry women have the following demographic characteristics: (a) they fall predominantly between the ages of 28 and 50; (b) they are single, married, divorced, or widowed, with or without children; (c) they vary in ethnicity and class; (d) they vary in educational attainments; and (e) they have varying amounts of work experience.

Many women re-enter the work force to supplement their spouses' income or to support their family due to divorce, death or unemployment of a spouse. Others re-enter for personal reasons such as to obtain greater personal satisfaction and fulfillment through a career. According to Sheehy (1976), some women preferred to begin a new career rather than return to the types of jobs they held before marriage since these jobs were usually lacking in opportunities for personal development.

For the purpose of this study, re-entry women are defined as those individuals re-entering the work force or preparing to re-enter by pursuing an education or

training program. This study examines the current needs and concerns of re-entry women focusing on the services that helping professionals, such as student affairs practitioners and counselors, can provide.

Method

The primary method for collecting information was the personal interview. It provided the most pertinent and current information for meeting the study's objectives.

The population for the interviews consisted of fourteen local, regional, and national helping professionals currently working with re-entry women and considered knowledgeable about re-entry women by other professionals. The population was developed through a process of selection and referral. Selection of professionals was based on the published reputation of their programs and additional professionals were referred by these individuals. The population represented private counseling firms, public agencies, and universities.

Interviews were conducted in person or by telephone. The interview questions followed a basic outline; (a) the professional's position and experience with re-entry women; (b) the professional's assessment of current needs and concerns of re-entry women; and (c) the services being provided by the professionals. Referrals to additional professionals were gathered during these interviews. In addition to answering questions, the professionals were encouraged to provide any other relevant information.

Results

Extensive information resulted from these interviews. Findings which were common to a majority of the professionals were identified as major findings and are listed below:

1. Re-entry women experience low self-esteem and self-confidence. Re-entry women are confused about who they are, what they are, and what they are doing with their lives.

2. Many of the problems of re-entry women originate with themselves as opposed to family members, friends, and children. For example, they are conditioned to be reserved achievers and postpone their development.

3. Re-entry women feel guilty about neglecting their children while preparing for and performing in the work force.

4. Re-entry women feel anxiety over having been away from work and school. Related to this, women are anxious about leaving their children unattended.

5. Financial insecurity is a contributing factor in creating anxiety among women.

6. A major need of re-entry women is to nurture and be nurtured. Group counseling was suggested as an approach for women to nurture each other, while individual counseling was suggested as an approach to explore ways to respond to their needs and nurture themselves.

7. All of the professionals viewed their counseling approaches and programs as an effective means of assisting women who want to pursue an education and re-enter the work force.

Four components similar among all of the programs were: (a) a self-discovery component including interests identification, value clarification, and skills

translation; (b) a career exploration component teaching decision-making techniques and goal management; (c) a support group component providing a positive setting for the development of communication, empathy, and trust; and (d) a job search skills component including role-play activities, information research, interviews, and resume writing.

The methods of providing service found to be similar by this study were (a) regular use of other agencies and professional networks for referrals; (b) utilization of a variety of educational structures such as courses, special workshops, luncheon discussions, non-credit courses, and individualized instruction; (c) use of information resources including data bases, libraries, professional publications, and popular media; (d) use of on-the-job training or internships; and (e) use of an eclectic style of counseling, combining active listening and empathy with instruction and confrontation skills.

Discussion

A majority of the professionals surveyed reported similar needs and concerns for re-entry women consistent with the findings of previous studies (Herthington & Hudson, 1981; Keith, 1981; Weinstein, 1980). When comparing approaches and programs, diversity was evident due to the individual design and characteristics of each program. However, a number of the programs utilized components similar to those promoted in the literature (Brooks, 1976; McGraw, 1982; Weinstein, 1980). Most of the professionals contacted utilized an eclectic approach to counseling, indicating a preference to develop styles oriented toward their clients. Such styles often involve the use of a combination of counseling and career development theories. Further, the use of eclectic approaches appears to confirm a current trend toward eclecticism in counseling and psychotherapy (Ward, 1983). Common perceptions of needs and individually designed programs with similar components tend to support the eclectic styles of the professionals providing assistance to re-entry women.

Recommendations and Conclusions

During the interviews, the professionals provided evaluations of their programs and counseling approaches. This information was synthesized and organized into a series of recommendations provided below. The recommendations are included to assist helping professionals in their work with re-entry women.

Personal considerations. Helping professionals should adjust their attitudes to overcome stereotypes concerning women's roles. They should try to understand each client's unique situation. In addition, they should act as role models and avoid parental attitudes in relations with their clients. Helping professionals should investigate sources of information useful to the client, paying particular attention to available sources of financial aid for education and job training.

Pre-career and career counseling. Helping professionals should identify "crisis" clients, who may display abnormal behavior and indicate the potential for harming themselves or others. In some cases, especially sudden separations from spouses or close relatives, clients may have to be referred to an appropriate agency for psychiatric attention. Upon beginning career counseling, the helping professional should conduct exercises which allow the clients to assess their

interests and skills, and to learn techniques for gathering occupational information, narrowing their career choices, and targeting potential jobs. Helping professionals should teach job search skills such as cover letter and resume writing, and interview techniques. They should also monitor the clients' job attainments and provide advice and encouragement when necessary.

Post-career counseling. Helping professionals should continually evaluate the career counseling process provided for the client and help the client realize that constant reassessment of changing needs may be necessary. Further, helping professionals should teach skills essential in retaining the acquired job. Some of these skills may include negotiating salary or wage increases, developing support networks, conducting self-evaluation and job-enrichment activities, managing personal finances, and responding to harassment and other problems.

Individual counseling. Helping professionals should engage in individual counseling to provide personal support and ensure confidentiality in special concerns. Through individual counseling, helping professionals can help clients identify specific psychological concerns which may not surface in a group counseling or support group setting. Such problems may present hidden barriers to the client's full participation in various career planning and placement activities.

Workshops and other programs. Helping professionals should plan and implement special topic workshops that are scheduled at varied intervals or as the client's needs dictate. Helping professionals should promote programs, such as brown bag luncheons, which offer peer support while increasing awareness of issues facing re-entry women.

Community relations. Helping professionals should become actively involved in generating publicity to increase community awareness of the support available for re-entry women. They should also be active in promoting referral networks among agencies, and in assisting support systems throughout the community, such as child care, continuing education programs, and financial planning workshops. Helping professionals should encourage clients to continue involvement with support groups as they become involved in the work force. Professional networks with ties to community agencies are another means whereby newly employed re-entry women can utilize and support community agencies.

Support groups. Helping professionals should actively promote support groups for the purpose of sharing problems and insights, and encouraging, nurturing and caring for one another. These support groups also decrease feelings of isolation while allowing re-entry women to practice problem-solving techniques, develop self-awareness of interests, values, and abilities, establish goals and objectives, and promote career orientation through the gathering and exchange of information.

Summary

Re-entry women are participating more in the work force. Their emergence on college campuses shows their desire to better prepare themselves through educational and training programs. This study provides a brief summary of the ways helping professionals in various settings are responding to the needs and concerns of re-entry women. By understanding the re-entry woman's needs and

concerns as well as related intervention programs and counseling approaches, helping professionals may become more responsive in designing appropriate programs and services.

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A philosophy that was popular at the turn of the century had as a premise that "every day in every way we are getting better and better." We are somewhat prejudiced of course, but we believe this adequately describes the Program in Higher Education and Student Affairs at Indiana University. The quality of our students and their program achievements, both on and off campus, continues to be most impressive; the scholarly activity of the faculty reported in the literature and at professional conferences continues to receive national recognition; and the success of our alumni in their professional positions and in the offices many hold in professional associations continues to bring distinction both to themselves and Indiana University. These characteristics, in turn, when bound together by our demonstrated mutual commitment to each other's growth and development provide the Indiana program its essence that continues to get better and better.

In keeping with this "state of the program" assessment let me report that many of us will be present at upcoming professional meetings: NASPA in Louisville, March 18-21; ACU-I in St. Louis, March 25-28; and ACPA in Baltimore, April 8-11. We will once again be hosting receptions at ACPA and NASPA for the gathering of alumni and friends. Be sure to look us up if you plan to attend one or more of these conventions. Also be sure to check convention programs for times and locations. We don't want to miss seeing you.

The annual CSPA Summer Institute will offer four workshops this year. The workshops each year are designed to respond to current institutional needs and have proven to be quite popular in the past. May 14-16 John Bean will offer a workshop on student attrition and student retention strategies. As part of the same bill I will again offer a workshop on assessing institutional distinctiveness. Both these programs were highly successful last year. June 27-29 Nancy Evans will offer a workshop on Women in Education, a topic for which she has acquired considerable recognition through her research and writing. Lastly, the long running annual Interfraternity Institute will again be held in July. It will be coordinated this year by Dick McKaig, Assistant Dean of Students. Please call or write should you wish further information about any of these important programs.

Many people have devoted considerable time and energy to provide you with this edition of the *Journal*. I would like to thank them for their dedication and the quality of their work. They have truly proven that in every way we are getting better and better.

Philip C. Chamberlain