

What Do We Know About Community Development Education?

Introduction

Job Growth:

Community development jobs in the U.S. continue to expand. Government labor statistics indicate it is a multi-billion dollar field. The growth is attributed towards the shift in state, regional and local decision-making and the rise of non-profit and quasi-government groups concerned with community participation.

The increased demand for community development has led to the creation of higher education degree programs.

Several master's and undergraduate degree programs have emerged in recent years. This does not include the growth of community development minors and certificates.

Fragmentation of the field.

Educators in post-secondary community development have not communicated with each other about relevant knowledge, skills and values associated with the field. The splintering of the field has been compounded by its multi-disciplinary nature. Curricula and teaching approaches have not been compared, contrasted or debated in a systematic way. Educators from the University of Kentucky, University of California-Davis and University of Detroit Mercy are leading this effort to address the fragmentation of the field.

Where is the voice of community development professionals about preparing people for the field?

There has not been a systematic approach to learn from community development practitioners regarding their opinions about the key knowledge, skills and values that are needed for the field. That's why we need to hear from people in your organization!

What kinds of knowledge are important for community development?

There isn't a lot of literature on this topic. The seven core themes below are not intended to be comprehensive.

- Know and understand the community in which we work. This includes a knowledge of internal and external influences at work include social, political and wider environmental influences at work.
- Build and maintain relationships with individuals and groups so that people's ability and opportunities to work and learn together are enhanced.
- Provide learning and development opportunities in a range of contexts so that people can identify and achieve their individual and collective including build self-confidence, health, employment and well-being.
- Facilitate and promote community empowerment so that people can take individual and collective action to bring about change. This includes a critical analysis of internal and external factors that influence individual and community practices.
- Organize and manage resources so that individuals, communities and organizations can achieve effective management of community assets and resources and services.

- Develop and support collaborative working so that people can enhance decision making that impact on the quality of life of individuals and communities.
- Evaluate and inform practice so that robust evidence can sustain, inform, influence and change policy and practice to include the value of research and evaluation. Practitioners also need to use self assessment, participative process and other evidence to critically reflect on their practice and experiences.

What are some of the practical skills that are needed to do community development?

There are at least 8 practical skills identified in some of the literature. It should be asserted that this list is not comprehensive.

- Listening to help people understand others and build a climate of trust.
- Emotional awareness about how groups are stimulated to improve critical thinking, creativity, decision-making and collective action.
- Cultural awareness and humility involves the ability to value, integrate and bridge multiple world views.
- Public deliberation involves citizens to explore choices about common concerns and to explore trade-offs regarding public options.
- Facilitation is a set of group skills that allows for maximum participation, group ownership, creativity and problem-solving.
- Appreciative Inquiry is a change process that focuses on what works best in a human system with a positive emphasis on strengths and assets for transformation.
- Empowerment is about creating a climate for groups to identify and mobilize their abilities to bring about social, economic and political change.

What are the key values that undergird community development?

The desired knowledge and skills for the field are value-laden. Some of the key values and ethics include:

- Promotion of active and representative participation in influence and decision-making.
- Engage members in learning about community issues and impacts associated with alternative courses of action.
- Incorporate diverse interests and cultures of community in participation, especially, those who may be economically or culturally disadvantaged.
- Work to enhance the leadership capacity of individuals, groups and organizations.
- Be open to full range of action plans to enhance long-term sustainability.

What's Next?

What's missing? What kinds of knowledge, practical skills and values need to be part of community development education?

There is not a sense of collective agreement in the field. That's why a national study focusing on Community Development Education is so important. Post-secondary educators in the U.S. want to learn more about common core knowledge, skills and values and educational practices throughout the country.