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Development and Implementation of a Criminal History Review Policy

Amy Tuley, LMSW, Director of Admissions & Student Services, School of Social Work
In collaboration with David Huizen, MPH, Catherine Kothari, MA, Ineke Way, LMSW, PhD, Amy Curtis, PhD, MPH,
& Admission Committee members for the School of Social Work

Academic Leadership Academy, 2010-2011



School of Social Work Mission Statement

Western Michigan University School of Social Work educates social workers to advocate for social and economic justice and personal well being for all people. The faculty provides leadership on a local, national, and international level through research, scholarship, community service and partnerships, and other creative activities relevant to the profession.

Purpose of Leadership Project

The School of Social Work at Western Michigan University requires all applicants to the undergraduate and graduate level social work programs to disclose any criminal history and participate in an interview with faculty before being considered for admission. However, at the start of the 2010-2011 academic year the school did not have clear policies regarding applicant criminal histories or clear procedures for applicant interviews.

The intent of this project was to research, develop, and implement a criminal history policy for the School of Social Work. The Admissions Committee wanted to develop a policy that held to the integrity of the Social Work profession while holding true to the Social Work values of self-determination and elimination of discrimination.

The Admissions Committee for the School of Social Work, along with Amy Tuley, was responsible for developing and proposing the policy. The project started in September 2010 with the goal of having a faculty vote on a proposed policy in the April 2011 faculty meeting.

Project Goals and Stakeholders

Project goal: Approval and implementation of a Criminal History Review Policy for School of Social Work.

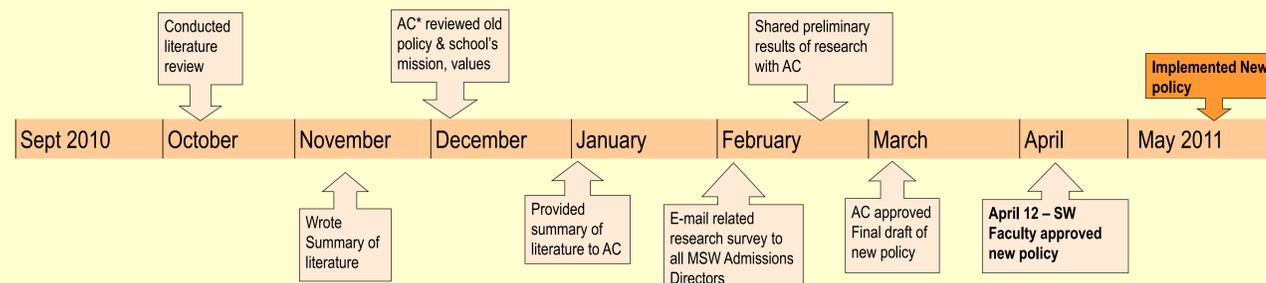
Sub-goals:

- School will reach agreement regarding why criminal history reviews are conducted.
- Admissions Committee will gain knowledge about research regarding criminal history reviews.
- Admissions Committee will develop a draft policy to send to the April, 2011 faculty meeting for approval.
- The Admissions Committee will make changes to the interview form and applications as needed based on the policy.
- The school will implement the new policy starting Fall 2011.

Stakeholders

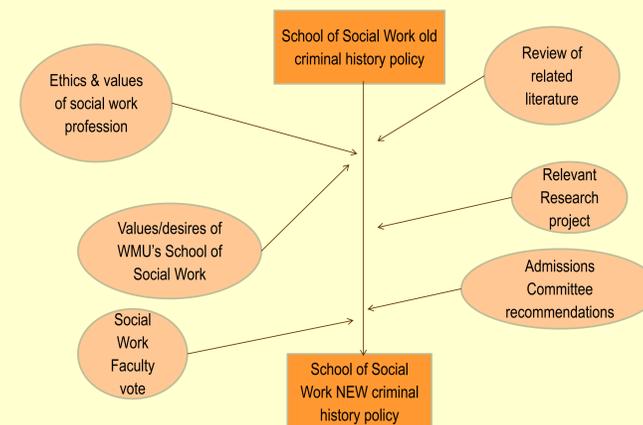
- Social work faculty
- Future applicants to the undergraduate and graduate social work programs
- The College of Health and Human Services

The Work of Developing and Implementing a NEW Criminal History Review Policy



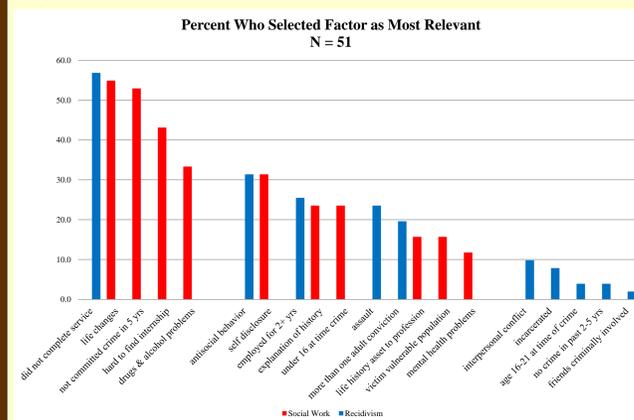
Role of Collaborating Members:

Amy Curtis: Instructor to student researchers
 David Huizen: student researcher
 Catherine Kothari: student researcher
 Mary Ellen Sartoris: Admissions Committee member
 Karen VanDuesen: Admissions Committee member
 Ineke Way: Admissions Committee chair
 Susan Weinger: Admissions Committee member



Relevant Related Research

Research regarding recidivism and social work values was conducted prior to a final draft of the policy being brought to a faculty vote. The research was conducted by Amy Tuley, David Huizen, and Cathy Kothari, Ph.D. students in the Interdisciplinary Health Sciences program at WMU, along with their instructor, Amy Curtis. The research was conducted using an on-line survey and focused on what factors are important to consider when examining criminal histories as well as social work values. The table below illustrates some results from the research:



Conclusions of research : This study was the first to include recidivism-related information when looking at admissions decisions by graduate social work programs. Given the heavy reliance upon social work factors, despite their uncertain predictive value, programs should consider integrating recidivism factors into the decision process.

Before implementation the draft policy was reviewed by two students, one BSW and one MSW, who had participated in criminal history interviews under the old criminal policy. Students gave feedback for changes, which were incorporated into the new criminal history policy. Both students stated that the new policy was much easier to understand and would have helped them to understand the reasons for and procedures associated with a criminal history review.

What is New in the New Policy?

- Statement of WMU's values regarding conduction reviews
- Detailed definition of *criminal history*
- Development of the Criminal History Review Team
- Description of 2 levels of criminal history interviews
- Development of clear procedures for implementation of policy
- Procedure for assessing offense specific risk related to recidivism
- Development of standard "error threshold" (based on risk or recidivism)
- Implements use of an recidivism assessment tool for all applicants with a criminal history
- Includes substantiated charges of abuse and/or neglect of a child or adult in the definition of criminal history

Outcomes & Lessons Learned

The Criminal History Review Policy was voting on and accepted by the School of Social Work faculty in the April 2011 faculty meeting. Effective leaderships was required for the success of this policy reform. Some lessons learned from this process were:

- The process of developing and implementing a policy for the School of Social work requires the work and cooperation of many individuals.
- Clear and concise communication between the collaborating members was key in the success of this policy
- It was important to incorporate research on recidivism in the discussion
- It is critical to always assess and understand the culture of an organization before attempting policy change
- Effective policy change requires time, leadership, and collaboration

Next Steps

The Criminal History Review policy was implemented in May of 2011. Next steps in implementation are:

- Examine and identify the recidivism risk scale for use in the school
- Research and ascertain the risk of recidivism associated with specific offenses
- The Admissions Committee will determine the "error threshold" for each offense
- Develop and implement standard interview questions and forms for the two types of criminal history interviews
- Train the Criminal History Review Teams at the Grand Rapids Campus, Main Campus, and Southwest Campus
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the new policy at the end of the 2012/2013 admissions cycle

Contact Information

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