

Building a Bridge: Exploring the Intersection of Social Work, Architecture, and Regional and City Planning for Stronger Communities

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Abstract

As defined by the World Health Organization, interprofessional practice is the “collaborative practice that happens when multiple health workers from different professional backgrounds work together with patients, families, carers, and communities to deliver the highest quality of care across settings” (World Health Organization, 2010, p. 7). Interprofessional collaborative practice is increasingly recognized as a means of best practice in the field of social work. Growing in momentum, interprofessional collaboration fosters an environment for a variety of professionals to learn from one another and gain greater insight, technique, and perspective on the identified objective. This article presents a case study of the experiences of faculty and graduate students at the University of Oklahoma in the respective fields of social work and regional and city planning as they partnered with the Oklahoma Housing Finance Agency to conduct a mixed-methods evaluation of housing resources, which included online surveys, focus groups with service providers, community stakeholders, and persons with lived experience of homelessness and/or housing instability. The findings indicate several key themes of the interprofessional collaboration between social work and regional and city planning: 1) reward of partnership, 2) city structures of homelessness, and 3) the multi-contextual factors impacting homelessness. The results suggest that by working with differing professions, faculty and students gained greater experience and opportunity, expanding their scope on modalities, assessment methodologies, analyzation techniques, and additional expertise on large-scale community intervention tactics. These findings have implications for future interprofessional partnerships that could foster dynamic community-level interventions and improvements.

Social Work and Interprofessional Practice with Healthcare, Education, and the Justice System

Interprofessional practice is the cornerstone of successful collaboration between various disciplines. It involves the active engagement of all parties in a collaborative effort to achieve a shared goal. By leveraging the diverse perspectives, knowledge, and skills of multiple disciplines, interprofessional practice ensures that all stakeholders have a voice in the development of effective and sustainable solutions (Donnelly et al., 2019). Collaboration can occur within similar organizations and professions, as well as between varying professions and types of organizations (Green & Johnson, 2015; Konrad, 2020). Interprofessional collaboration can create and lead to better outcomes as practitioners leverage their individual strengths and skills together to create more efficient, impactful, and effective interventions to complex problems.

Growing interest in interprofessional practice has led to the implementation of interprofessional

education to help prepare students to work in collaborative, multi-disciplinary teams after graduation. Over the course of the past decade, social workers have served as the catalyst for the evolving field of interprofessional education (IPE) in healthcare (Jones & Phillips, 2016). IPE equips professionals with the ethics, standards, and core values of varying professions, creating a more comprehensive and wholistic perspective when working with target populations. As the prominence of IPE continues to emerge, the core competencies pertaining to the practice are: 1) values and ethics, 2) roles and responsibilities, 3) interprofessional communication, and 4) teams and teamwork (Interprofessional Education Collaborative [IPEC], 2011).

The interprofessional relationship between social work and regional and city planning is an emerging collaborative concept; however, overall interest in interprofessional practice and education between social work and a variety of professions has grown in recent years (Sweifach, 2015). Historically,

social work has engaged in interprofessional practice with healthcare, education, and criminal justice. This article builds upon this rich history of interprofessional collaboration by presenting the experiences of faculty and students from both social work and regional and city planning, as members from both professions collaborated to evaluate housing services and gaps statewide in Oklahoma. This paper expands on established interprofessional collaboration and presents a new and potentially impactful area of collaboration between social work and design fields like regional and city planning.

Social Work Practice with Healthcare

Interprofessional collaboration is commonly known and studied within the context of healthcare. Interprofessional collaboration in healthcare has mounting evidence that it provides the most wholistic and comprehensive care to patients, which in turn promotes improved health outcomes (Ansa et al., 2020; Addy et al., 2015; Glaser & Suter, 2016; Khalili et al., 2013). To achieve high-quality healthcare, collaborative practice involves multiple healthcare workers from various professional backgrounds joining forces to provide comprehensive services to patients and their families, caregivers, and communities (Chong et al., 2013; Green & Johnson, 2015). Interprofessional teams typically include physicians, nurses, therapists, social workers, nutritionists, and other healthcare professionals who together use their diverse skills and expertise to diagnose and treat a wide range of medical conditions (Schot et al., 2020).

Social Work Practice with Education

Social workers have been in k-12 schools since the early 1900s working to address inequities and improve outcomes for vulnerable students (Alvarez et al., 2013). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) defines school social work as “an integral link between school, home, and community in helping students achieve academic success ... providing leadership in forming school discipline policies, mental health intervention, crisis management, and supportive services” (NASW, n.d., para. 1). School social workers take a multi-level systems approach and work on improving student well-being by engaging in administrative and macro practice, group work, and direct practice (Berg, 2020). School social workers often perform student and family assessments, conduct home visits, develop

treatment plans, and make referrals to community resources (Lige, 2021).

Social Work Practice with the Justice System

Collaboration between law enforcement and social workers has been imperative in prevention, intervention, and stabilization efforts. Social workers embedded with police officers offer services to survivors of crime and to offenders (Wilson & Wolfer, 2020). They engage in case management, crisis intervention, and treatment planning. These social workers attend staff meetings, work alongside police officers, and provide an array of trainings’ such as stress management, counseling services, community resource identification, and self-regulation and stabilization techniques (Notko et al., 2021).

This partnership and the integration of social work into the prison environment has also been a noteworthy area of collaboration (Matejkowski et al., 2014; Young et al., 2021). Within the prison system, social workers are responsible for a wide array of tasks, including initiating intake screenings and assessments, providing crisis intervention, conducting clinical assessments, delivering ongoing treatment, executing case management, and facilitating release-planning services (Matejkowski et al., 2014). Social workers offer a wholistic perspective on prison rehabilitation, focusing on the individual’s strengths, resiliency, and human rights, while also addressing institutional factors (Fedock, 2017).

Social Work Practice with Architecture and Regional and City Planning

As illustrated above, social work has a rich history of partnering with a broad range of professions, including healthcare, education, and the justice system. Social work engagement with the fields of architecture and city planning are less prominent in the literature, though there is great potential for these partnerships to benefit communities and municipalities. Zip codes, as proxies for neighborhoods and physical locations, are a significant predictor of health outcomes and longevity (Graham, 2016). An individual’s physical location not only impacts their physical well-being, but also one’s social and emotional outcomes and career trajectory based on the resources available within that zip code or neighborhood (Graham, 2016; Sampson, 2012). Health and well-being are critical factors to consider in the design of cities—ensuring cities are walkable, inclusive, mixed use, and promote overall healthy lifestyles

and opportunities for social engagement (Zhu et al., 2013). Principles from the professions of social work, city planning, and architecture are complementary in that they aim to promote restorative practices that positively correlate to improved health and well-being through natural and built environments (Cistrunk et al., 2019).

Successful Interprofessional Project

We present the partnership between the University of Oklahoma (OU) departments of social work and regional and city planning to implement the Home American Rescue Plan (Home ARP) project. Oklahoma, through the Oklahoma Housing Finance Agency (OHFA), was allocated \$30 million from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) to assist individuals or households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and other vulnerable populations, by providing housing, rental assistance, supportive services, and non-congregate shelters to reduce homelessness and increase housing stability. To access the Home ARP funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), OHFA partnered with OU to develop a plan for the implementation of and access to these funds. The Home ARP project brought together faculty members and graduate students from the departments of social work and regional and city planning to partner with OHFA to provide a statewide assessment of housing resources and gaps in services. The research team was composed of three faculty members and seven graduate students—representing a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

Several students were international students from varying countries, and others represented both rural and urban backgrounds within the United States. Faculty members had a wide variety of research and professional interests, including the criminal justice system, working with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, school social work, and physical determinants of health with a focus on under-resourced communities. Together, the team designed and implemented a mixed-methods evaluation of housing resources and gaps, which included online surveys and focus groups with service providers and people with lived experience of homelessness or housing instability. Service providers and participants were invited to participate in the research by attending regional stakeholder meetings held within different regions across the state. In total, there were five

regional meetings that represented more than 75 organizations. The online survey had $n = 87$ respondents. In addition, one statewide virtual meeting was held for participants who could not attend their regional meeting. Those with lived experience were recruited via partnership with agencies that provide services to those facing barriers to housing. Three lived-experience stakeholder meetings were held in three different continuums of care representing different regions of the state. The digital lived-experience survey had $n = 75$ respondents. The findings provided the foundation necessary to design and submit the state allocation plan for \$30 million in project funds to address homelessness. The finalized plan was later approved by HUD. The OU Institutional Review Board approved the study and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Methods

Following the completion of the project, the research team and authors of this article convened via video conference to reflect upon the collaboration process that had taken place throughout the project. A modified ethnographic approach was used to draw conclusions about group members' experiences (Kramer & Adams, 2017). The team developed research questions aimed to 1) address the educational impact and lessons learned because the team was primarily comprised of students; 2) address the novel experience of the collaboration between the different disciplines because this was the first time any of the team members had collaborated with the other profession; and 3) identify any contributions or lessons learned that may be useful for other communities and interprofessional research teams (Linhorst, 2002; Wannapiroon, 2014). As a result, the following discussion prompts were developed: 1) describe key interprofessional learning or what you learned from social work and regional and city planning; 2) describe the strengths of working together; and 3) describe the key elements of designing a community that promotes health and well-being. The meeting was recorded, and the authors then transcribed the meeting and performed qualitative content analysis using open coding to identify the emerging themes (Esterberg, 2002).

Three of the authors independently identified emerging themes, then met together to engage in a consensus procedure to clarify and build agreement on the meaning of the themes. The findings were shared with the research team to

establish accuracy of the data and analysis process (Padgett, 2008). Analysis of the data indicated the following themes: partnership, city structures of homelessness, and the multi-contextual factors impacting homelessness.

Findings

Reward of Partnership

The first theme identified was the reward of partnership between social work and regional and city planning. This partnership showed great reward in the opportunity for social work to increase their reach and scope of practice by collaborating with regional and city planning. In addition, the interprofessional collaboration led to expansion of thought between both professions. This was especially prominent for social work students as they tackled macro-level issues, as demonstrated by the following quote:

Macro level courses in social work don't seem very concrete; they tend to make you feel helpless as the issue gets larger. One on one is more comfortable. [I] did not really know what planners did; this relationship has made me aware and now it seems more tangible and sustainable as an approach.

In working with each other and incorporating knowledge from each field, the team also emphasized the importance of community engagement to build functioning, inclusive communities. One planning student shared: "for allocating resources ... collaboration helps to ensure that it isn't just planners making decisions, community engagement is so important." The planning faculty member went on to state: "It's important to bring more voices to the table because planners can't do it alone. We need collective voice and collective will to encourage policy makers to actually make this stuff happen."

While social workers often work closely with community members at a micro level, city planning students identified micro-level practice or speaking directly to individuals and stakeholders as a challenge. One planning student described their experience with engagement:

You need to engage with the community, but we don't have that background in our minds. I learned a lot of just how to speak with people, how to bring every voice, and ask them a different type of question to just hear from them.

City Structures of Homelessness

Throughout the research process, social work revealed the impacts of city planning and zoning laws on people experiencing homelessness. For regional and city planning students, learning focused on the social nuance of planning locations for services. One regional and city planning student highlighted the impact of where the city plans to locate shelters and the complications of the social nuance of "NIMBY" regarding homeless resources and public shelters. NIMBY, an acronym for "Not In My Backyard," describes the phenomenon in which "residents of a neighbourhood designate a new development (e.g. shelter, affordable housing, group home) or change in occupancy of an existing development as inappropriate or unwanted for their local area". (Homeless Hub, n.d., para. 1). Regional and city planning students recognized that city planners often unintentionally dismiss the need for locations of services that are accessible to the populations needing them due to pressure to create a more idealistic version of the city. One regional and city planning student highlighted the importance of collaboration in remedying the complexity of this issue:

Sometimes when we are allocating resources, the planner decides where it should go, where does the money go, facility, we allocate this kind of stuff, but this collaboration helped to be sure that we allocate the funds in a good way, in a way that meets the community needs.

Collaboration also forged understanding for the need of accessible transportation in cities. While many cities have bus lines, sidewalks, or bike lanes, they are not consistent throughout the city and often do not extend to where social services are being provided. Social work students realized that the problems often associated with homelessness such as transportation, location of services, housing, and employment are often under the purview of regional and city planning. By working together, each field is allowed to expand on meeting community needs without being the sole provider. One social work student reflected on this sentiment:

Reducing the work of social work. The burden is often placed on us, and we do this a lot, we believe that we care so much, and that we have to fix it. We believe that others do not care as much but it is so incredible to reach out and stretch across

disciplines to learn. There are a lot of people who care, you must seek them out. Break out of the circle. The collaborative process of access starts with solidarity at the root of the issue. By offering the collaboration between social workers and regional and city planning, we can expand services within the community. The burden of care can be shared to prevent burnout and increase the quality of service offered.

Multi-Contextual Factors Impacting Homelessness

Another prominent theme reiterated throughout this collaboration was the concept that homelessness is not a singular or isolated issue. While the project and designated funding was to assist individuals who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, additional challenges were uncovered, including (but not limited to) mental illness, unreliable transportation, the physical location of agencies/resources, duration in which an individual experiences homelessness, and a community's overall perception of those experiencing homelessness. As the problems became more expansive, the expertise and understanding of the two professions became even more necessary, providing the opportunity to learn from additional viewpoints, tactics, and strategies. When assessing the methodologies in which each profession approached the funding objectives, both indicated variance in their approach to problem solving.

Partnership became increasingly beneficial through the intermingling of these perspectives, effectively marrying a systems framework with that of a community approach. First, students from regional and city planning indicated a newfound understanding and emphasis placed on engaging with the opinions of the community in which they are serving. Highlighting this, one student stated that he began "advocating with clients instead of for them," because of his time spent working with social workers. Meanwhile, social workers identified an increased knowledge about zoning laws, the importance of city planning, and ultimately, how different professions can approach the same challenge in drastically different ways. One social work faculty member expressed this with the following statement:

Social workers often adopt a belief that they are the sole solution and provider of

care for a community. Having architecture and city planning present allowed for the expansion of solutions and the resolution of hope in a wicked problem.

Through interprofessional collaboration, homelessness evolved from a personal or micro issue to that of a public issue. Mutual reciprocity and trust between professions created a comprehensive relationship allowing sustainable solutions for allocating resources. By taking time to engage in interprofessional collaboration between regional and city planning and social workers, one participant shared this inspiring quote: "The hope that things can be repaired, fixed, and prevented was an incredibly rewarding part of the partnership."

Implications for Social Work

Social work has a rich history of engaging with a broad range of professions and fields of practice to address longstanding social problems and engage in capacity building (Laverack, 2022). The research report "Introduction and Context for Grand Challenges for Social Work" highlights the importance of expanding proven approaches that have worked in communities across the country, develop new service innovations and technologies, and adopt policies that promote affordable housing and basic income security (Sherraden et al., 2013). This article has presented a successful case study example of interprofessional collaboration between faculty and students in regional and city planning and social work addressing housing and homelessness statewide in Oklahoma. This work further illustrates the value of interprofessional practice and the necessity of professionals working together to address complex, multifaceted community concerns.

Next Steps for Social Work

Next steps for social work include fostering interprofessional engagement by further developing interprofessional training and education between social work and regional and city planning. Organizations such as Neighbor Works and the Asset-Based Community Development Institute offer training surrounding community development and bringing together community members and different professions (Asset-Based Community Development Institute, n.d.; Neighbor Works America, n.d.). Utilizing these models of

community development and training helps to strengthen interprofessional practice.

University departments of social work and regional and city planning can share electives, create dual degrees, and build collaborative research spaces for social work and regional and city planning students to apply their shared learning to address complex community problems. By intentional development and sharing of curricular content, social work students will gain a better understanding of the impact of design and infrastructure on the lives and well-being of the people they serve. Students of regional and city planning would gain skills in community engagement and be better prepared to promote the voice of the community in design and community development. Several universities have dual degree programs in social work and planning, and these degrees allow students to take social action through addressing societal issues in the development of communities and services within (University of Michigan Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, n.d.). Universities with dual degree programs include the University of Southern California Sol Price School of Public Policy, the University of Pennsylvania Weitzman School of Design, and many more (University of Southern California Sol Price School of Public Policy, n.d.; University of Pennsylvania Weitzman School of Design, n.d.).

If this emphasis on interprofessional practice continues to grow, largescale results could be seen in city design that encapsulates the needs of the population. This includes the expansion of transportation services, design and location of sidewalks, increased accessibility to government buildings, and designated city zones where people experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness can engage with needed services.

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