

Social work internships for graduate students

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Humboldt State University Master of Social Work students can credit an eight-year partnership between HSU and the Department of Health and Human Services with helping them learn important lessons both in the classroom and the workplace.

HSU launched its Master of Social Work program in 2004, adding to an already existing bachelor's program. The university collaborated with community and government leaders to design the program, which focuses on social work needs in rural and Native American communities. Since the program began, HSU has also worked with the Department of Health and Human Services to offer yearlong internships at its Mental Health and Social Services branches.

Raena West of Bayside and Scott Ralston of Eureka, who will graduate from HSU on May 12 along with 21 other MSW students, say the internships have enhanced their educational experience.

"It's one thing to read about social work and mental health, but quite another to do the work and gain exposure," Ralston said. "I've had the opportunity to see how the role of a social worker changes in all of the units in which I've spent time, and been able to shadow a number of different staff with different styles."

A main goal of the graduate program is to produce well-educated, well-trained social workers to best assist local children, families and individuals in need. The internships offer on-site training to complement what the students are learning in the classroom.

"This is a really important partnership for us because these students represent our future workforce," said DHHS Assistant Director of Programs Barbara LaHaie, who is also a lecturer in HSU's Master of Social Work program. "We used to have social workers who were at the bachelor's level, and by having this local MSW program we've increased the professionalism, knowledge and expertise of our workforce."

In the past year, West and Ralston have interned at several Mental Health Branch venues, including Psychiatric Emergency Services, Sempervirens Psychiatric Health Facility, Adult Outpatient Services and Same Day Services.

"The students benefit from the supervision they are provided from seasoned workers at the county and they also develop skills that are necessary to seek employment," said HSU Department of Social Work Chair Ronnie Swartz.

This is the first year that DHHS has used this new "rotation model" for its internships. It gives students a chance to work in different Mental Health Branch programs over the school year instead of just a single location.

"The rotation allows students to have the best opportunity to see the full array of services provided in a public mental health system," said Mental Health Branch Deputy Director Asha George. "We wanted them to get a broader view of the department. It prepares them to be able to work in any of the areas in our mental health system."

To encourage graduates to stay and work in Humboldt County after they are finished with school, HSU offers two stipend programs to qualified MSW students through the California Social Work Education Center. Students interested in careers in child welfare can apply for Title IV-E Child Welfare Training Program stipends of \$18,500 a year in return for agreeing to work for a child welfare service agency -- such as DHHS' Child Welfare Services -- after graduation for each year they received the federally-funded support.

CalSWEC -- a state coalition of social work educators and practitioners -- also partners with the California Department of Mental Health to offer second-year MSW students a Mental Health Educational Stipend funded by the Mental Health Services Act. In return for an \$18,500 stipend, full-time students intern at DHHS' Mental Health Branch, then agree to work for DHHS, or a similar setting, for at least one year after graduation.

"This not only allows for an increase in the number of licensed mental health professionals, but also for the inclusion

and infusion of Mental Health Services Act principles in graduate-level education,” George said.

MHSA provides funding to counties to expand and develop innovative and integrated mental health services for children, youth, adults and older adults. California voters passed the legislation in November 2004. MHSA is funded through an additional 1 percent income tax on Californians whose annual income exceeds \$1 million.

West and Ralston both earned CalSWEC stipends and say the funding helped them reach their educational goals.

To receive a stipend, students must go through a competitive interview process conducted by a panel of supervisors from local mental health agencies. As part of the stipend requirements, students must take an extra mental health seminar class and cover extra competencies in their internships.

”I have made good use of the stipend,” West said. “It has allowed me to focus on school and my internship without having to also have a part-time job.”

Since HSU's Master of Social Work program began eight years ago, 41 MSW graduates have gone on to work at DHHS for some period of time, Swartz said. More than half of these former students are still employed with DHHS.

”This is a win-win situation,” LaHaie said. “HSU knows their students will likely be employed, so it has a good outcome for them, and we have finally gotten the expertise and experience in the workforce that we've been wanting for years.”

For more information about the HSU Master of Social Work program, visit www.humboldt.edu/socialwork.