

NEWS RELEASE

Wilfrid Laurier University



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Schools of social work need changes, study by Laurier dean finds

A Native child placed in a white foster home is not visited by her mother, despite the urging of the social worker; the Portuguese parents of a teenage girl found wandering downtown late at night refuse to let her come home; an elderly Chinese man living with his son's family refuses to eat and sits alone in his room.

How to better train social workers to cope with such situations in Ontario's multicultural society has been the subject of a year-long study at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo.

Funded by a \$29,600 grant from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, the project is one of six government-sponsored studies aimed at making professional education more responsive to Ontario's multicultural population.

Dr. Shankar Yelaja, project director and dean of social work at Laurier, says Ontario's schools of social work must adapt. "These programs offer little preparation for work with ethnocultural minorities despite recognition of the need by [a national accreditation body], the schools themselves, and social agencies."

A survey of the 10 schools in the province found "token" multicultural programs are prevalent; that most schools have a

limited amount of content regarding ethnocultural issues in their core courses; that there is no systematic approach to its inclusion in curricula; and that there is a lack of consistency in both multicultural content and its placement within the academic program.

"Schools of social work ought to play a leadership role with respect to social change," the report says.

"Social work education can contribute to acceptance of minorities within Canada by designing and delivering services in a way which is sensitive to minority values and needs," it adds. "By struggling with the issues which impede the incorporation of multicultural issues, social work education can advance understanding [about] how racial and cultural discrimination can be overcome in society."

Among its 16 recommendations, the report urges the schools:

- * to revise personnel policies to ensure equity in the appointment of minority faculty;
- * to develop programs for the recruitment and support of minority students;
- * to infuse core curricula with content regarding racial and cultural issues;
- * to offer development programs for faculty and training for field instructors;
- * and to develop field placements in agencies which specialize in serving minority clients.

Respondents to a survey of Ontario's 10 schools of social work and 40 agencies at which Laurier students do field placement called for curricula to include information on the history, values, and culture of minority groups. Further, they called for curricula to include an examination of minorities' special needs and relevant legislation, policies, and services.

Respondents emphasized the importance of creating awareness about the impact of discrimination.

They also stressed the need for the development of cross-cultural communication skills and culturally attuned clinical,

advocacy, administration, and community development abilities.

It is important that student populations be ethnically diverse, the report says, because many minority clients prefer to be served by social workers who share their ethnic background. Agencies surveyed indicated the need for ethnic minority workers as the demand for services for immigrants and refugees continues to grow.

Preliminary results of another national study indicate minorities are under-represented in Canadian schools of social work. Other research has found students gain greater understanding of cultural differences when training occurs within an ethnically diverse mix of students.

The report also calls for more research on issues in social work regarding visible minorities. Some researchers have suggested racism pervades social work. Information regarding the attitudes of social workers on racial diversity is required in order to design curricula.

In the faculty of social work at Laurier, there are 197 students in the masters program and 22 in the doctoral program.