

# MSW students, community practitioners benefit from side-by-side instruction

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When “Strategies for Community Behavioral Health Practice” (SWK 700) debuted last August, the course’s faculty architects believed a deliberate pairing of [master of social work](#) (MSW) students and local mental health providers participating in the class would inspire mutual learning.

Their vision has become a reality.

This semester, 15 MSW students in SU’s [College of Human Ecology](#) and 10 Syracuse-area agency practitioners meet weekly to consider new pathways to engage individuals in hopeful conversations focused on recovery rather than illness or limitations. The approaches taught focus on discovering people’s strengths and personal desires to enhance motivation, speed the healing process, and build resources needed to pursue life goals.

Course creators Christine Tyrrell, who teaches SWK 700, and Paul Caldwell, associate professor of social work and director of SU’s MSW program, believe the community-based practice course content will prepare students for the essential person-centered approach that human service agencies are seeking as they hire new professionals.

What makes the course unique—and what has added to its success—is the participation by social work practitioners as seasoned professionals and as students of social work practice. Caldwell and Tyrrell created the course with a purposeful focus on the University’s vision to give back to the community while forging meaningful interaction among students, faculty and local agencies.

The course provides learning opportunities for local practitioners, exposing them to strategies they could consider in their daily practice, while providing a forum for MSW students to benefit from these experiences and offer perspectives as future practitioners.

“From a student’s perspective, I feel like I am making connections with people in the field who I may cross paths with in the future as I start to practice,” says Kathleen Pesci, an MSW student graduating in May 2010. “The material we have learned is applicable to my field placement, which is very short-term work in a hospital setting with the dying. I have found myself using techniques already.”

The class is held purposely in the Syracuse community at Onondaga Case Management Services, where Tyrrell is the director of best practices initiatives. This agency serves more than 600 people, assisting with coordination of services and supports, including treatment, vocational

services, education, housing and meaningful community connections to help individuals and families live satisfying lives.

Course participant Regina DeMola, a social worker at Central New York Developmental Services, is grateful for the opportunity to become “refreshed” in her social work role through SWK 700. “As a full-time social worker doing case management with families and children who have a wide range of disabilities, the strategies and themes for treatment covered in class offer practitioners and students alike a great opportunity to reflect on social work practice strategies,” says DeMola.

One focus Tyrrell has in the course is developing meaningful assessments and using treatment planning as an effective tool. With the first course assignment, titled “Taking Charge of My Own Happiness,” students learn how simple interventions aimed at building personal strength and well-being can be beneficial to combat depression and increase happiness.

Of this assignment, DeMola says, “I feel like I’ve added another layer to my treatment approaches that can assist the clients I am working with.”

About a year ago, Caldwell participated in a training program led by Tyrrell through Onondaga County’s participation in the Western NY Care Coordination Program. The training introduced person-centered planning as a process for working with people recovering from mental health disorders, substance abuse and/or developmental disabilities.

“Christine’s competence and energy around the topics and her approach to teaching them sold me on pursuing this new course adventure,” says Caldwell. As a practitioner for 15 years prior to joining the SU faculty, Caldwell found the opportunity engaging and felt students would be better prepared as new graduates to enter jobs in the local community with an experience similar to the one he had training with Tyrrell.

“Through the course, professionals in the community are not only receiving excellent training that will help in providing quality services, but if they do not yet have a master’s degree they may also come to believe they can go back to school and pursue the MSW,” says Caldwell.

“There are a lot of good things coming out of this class. Being teamed up with two, three or four other people allows for a good mix of experiences and interaction from others’ perspectives,” says Gary Scott, a mental health counselor at St. Joseph’s Inpatient Psychiatric Services.

“This has been a great experience. I have seen my way of thinking change even in my personal life to a more person-centered approach,” Pesci says. “I consider myself to be lucky to have been among the first group of people to take this course, which in my opinion, should become a requirement for all MSW students.”

Initially, there was a tremendous response from community practitioners to participate in the class, with more than 25 inquiries, so Tyrrell narrowed the field by selecting practitioner participants who could commit to the entire semester. Practitioners come from local agencies like Liberty Resources, AURORA of Central New York, YWCA, St. Joseph’s Hospital Inpatient

Services and Onondaga Case Management involved in clinical, residential and other direct service roles.

Tyrrell believes one of the major benefits of the course is that it “inspires students to make a genuine difference as social work professionals.”

“As a licensed social worker in practice for a number of years, it is always exciting to have moments when I can encourage others who are interested in or already working in the field of social work,” DeMola says. “The spirit of the social work field has been an inspiration for me.”