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Gaining Understanding of Human Services Professionals: A Survey of NOHS Membership

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Gaining Understanding of Human Services Professionals: A Survey of NOHS Membership

Narketta Sparkman-Key, Alyssa Reiter

Abstract

Through a survey of the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS), this article examines the demographics, credentials, and interest in becoming involved in the human services profession as well as in advocacy efforts for human services issues. It is hoped that the findings will be used to further define the nature of the human services professional, to expand recruitment efforts by NOHS, to assist in conference planning, and to help define curriculum standards within human services accreditation.

Introduction

The National Organization of Human Services (NOHS) focuses on embracing, engaging and expanding membership within the organization to support its mission "to foster excellence in human service delivery through education, scholarship and practice" (National Organization of Human Services [NOHS], n.d., "About Us," para. 1). In recent years, NOHS has been at the forefront of establishing the field of human services and branding the identity of human service practitioners, educators, and students (Sparkman & Neukrug, 2014). However, NOHS was once an organization in which membership consisted solely of educators. Over a 30-year span, it has expanded to include practitioners and students (NOHS, n.d.). As reported by the NOHS membership chair, a recent account of members has indicated significant growth in membership over the last few years (personal communication, February 12, 2016).

Today, NOHS is home to 1,771 members, including 1,246 student members, 333 educators/practitioners, and 176 organizational members (personal communication, February 12, 2016). As a result of the growth in membership, the current governing body of NOHS thought it was important to assess its membership in order to gain insight that would lend information to expand professional development opportunities, guide conference focus, form committees, guide marketing, recruit members, and understand the needs of those served by NOHS (NOHS Board, personal communication, June 6, 2014). It was then implied that this information would be useful in advocating for the field and provide a foundation for further research that seeks to clarify the identity of human services professionals.

Methodology

The current membership chair and advocacy chair of NOHS, with input from the entire NOHS board, developed a survey to assess the demographics of their membership, suggestions for advocacy, areas of experience with advocacy, and interest in service within NOHS (NOHS Board, personal communication, August 20, 2014).

Instrument

Questions were developed based on demographic categories identified within the United States Census (U.S. Census Bureau, n. d.) and demographics found in previous survey research studies (Neukrug & Sparkman, 2014). Additional questions were added to address NOHS membership specific information, such as interest in organizational service and Tau Upsilon

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Alpha Honors Society affiliation. The questionnaire was piloted by soliciting a select group of 10 NOHS members, and alterations were made based on feedback from that group. The executive board of NOHS provided primary human subjects approval of the survey. The questionnaire consisted of 23 items that assessed age, gender identity, sexual/relational orientation, race/ethnicity, geographic location/regional affiliation, education, field of study as well as advocacy interest, experience with advocacy, and suggestions for how to improve NOHS advocacy efforts. Additionally, the questionnaire assessed whether participants held a professional credential in their respective fields, had membership in Tau Upsilon Alpha (TUA), and had interest in national service in NOHS. A final item asked for additional comments.

Data Collection

        Researchers collected data via the Internet using Survey Monkey. Registered current members were emailed the link to the questionnaire on four separate occasions from November 2014 to October 2015. The questionnaire was also available on the organization website under the secure "members only" tab, allowing for current members to participate. In addition, new members were emailed the questionnaire after membership was confirmed. Announcements were also made at the NOHS conferences to members to encourage participation in the emailed study. Participants had the option of opting out of the survey at any time and consent was obtained prior to participants beginning the survey.

        Of 1771 members, 440 individuals participated for a response rate of 24.34%, which surpassed the needed response rate of 316 for a 95% confidence rate and 5% margin of error. The response rate is about average with other sociological email surveys (Shih & Fan, 2009).

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Findings

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         Participants reported their ethnic/cultural heritage, having the option of making more than one selection. Of the respondents, 52.44% ($n = 226$) were identified as White, 39.91% ($n = 172$) as Black or African American, 8.82% ($n = 38$) Hispanic or Latino, and 5.81% ($n = 25$) as Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or American Indian or Alaska Native. 6.51% ($n = 30$) identified as having multiple ethnicities or racial identities.

        Respondents ranged in age from 17-72 years old with 32.19% ($n = 141$) identifying as 46-55 years old, 23.52% ($n = 103$) as 36-45, 16.44% ($n = 72$) as 25-35, 5.02% ($n = 22$) as 18-24, 4.11% ($n = 18$) as 66-75, and .46% ($n = 2$) as under 18. Master's degree was the highest degree earned by 27.59% ($n = 109$) of the respondents, followed by 22.53% ($n = 89$) with a bachelor's degree, 20.25% ($n = 80$) with a doctorate, 16.71% ($n = 66$) with an associate's degree, and 12.91% ($n = 51$) of participants with a high school diploma or GED.

        Participants were asked to identify their professional identity and 58.6% ($n = 258$) selected more than one profession. However, the majority of members, 91.96% ($n = 389$), are currently in the human services field. Additionally, 31.91% ($n = 135$) were in the counseling field, 24.82% ($n = 105$) in social work, and 16.31% ($n = 69$) in psychology. Some also noted additional fields they were in: 36.96% ($n = 17$) specified education, 34.78% ($n = 16$) medical field, 17.39% ($n = 8$) business, and 6.52% ($n = 3$) criminal justice. An additional 4.35% ($n = 2$) of participants indicated they were unemployed or did not specify their career field.

        Respondents were asked to indicate whether they were credentialed in their field, and 47.83% ($n = 208$) indicated that they were. Additionally, 50.29% ($n = 210$) responded that they were not credentialed or the question was not applicable to them. Some participants, 1.88%

(n=8.27), did not respond to this question. NOHS members with the Human Services Board Certified Practitioner (HS-BCP) credential comprised 17.05% ($n = 59$) of responses. Respondents with counseling-related certifications (Licensed Professional Counselor, Marriage and Family Therapist, Chemical Dependency Counselor Assistant, Licensed School Counselor, Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Certified Rehabilitation Counselor, National Certified Counselor, Certified Substance Abuse Counselor) were 11.88% ($n = 41$), Social Work related credentials (identified by respondents as Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Master Social Work and Clinical Social Worker) were 6.96% ($n = 24$), and psychology related certification and licensure (Licensed Psychologist, Licensed Clinical Psychologist, Licensed Clinical Psychotherapist) made up 1.74% ($n = 6$) of responses. In addition, 6.09% ($n = 21$) of NOHS members reported that they were credentialed in a field other than human services, counseling, social work, and psychology. Some such fields were nursing, EMT, insurance, religious leadership, and teaching. Those with dual certification or licensure accounted for 4.06% ($n = 14$) of responses.

Geographically, most respondents—41.85% ($n = 154$)—reside in the Southern region of the United States. This is followed by 21.20% ($n = 78$) residing in the Midwest region, 17.66% ($n = 65$) in the Western region, 12.23% ($n = 45$) in New England, and 7.07% ($n = 26$) in the Northwest. All states, with the exception of Montana and Utah, were represented within the survey responses. Aside from the United States, one participant indicated their country of origin as Japan and two indicated their country of origin as Canada. A great portion of respondents, 45.69% ($n = 191$), indicated they lived in an urban area, 30.62% ($n = 128$) indicated they live in a suburban area, and 23.68% ($n = 99$) in a rural area.

When asked to identify their gender, the majority marked female (80.37% [$n = 352$]) and 19.63% ($n = 186$) male. Over ninety percent (99.77%; $n = 485$) reported they did not identify as transgender and .23% ($n = 5$) did not respond. In regards to sexual/relational orientation, 89.12% ($n = 344$) identified as heterosexual, 3.37% ($n = 13$) as bisexual, 3.11% ($n = 12$) as lesbian, 2.59% ($n = 10$) as gay, and the remaining 2.85% ($n = 11$) identified as either asexual, pansexual, questioning, or queer.

In relation to participation in Tau Upsilon Alpha Honors Society (TUA), 17.03% ($n = 46$) reported that they were members of TUA. When asked about their interest in working more closely with NOHS by serving on committees, 46.33% ($n = 183$) indicated an interest in serving on a NOHS committee and 63.67% ($n = 212$) of those mentioned were specifically interested in participating in advocacy activities. Of all respondents, 17.36% ($n = 46$) indicated that they would like to see the organization advocate for issues related to "community services." This was followed by homelessness (13.58%; $n = 36$), abuse (9.81%; $n = 26$), mental health (6.42%; $n = 17$), and youth related issues (5.66%; $n = 15$). Those that replied indicated that activities involving youth and children (10.10%; $n = 20$), family services (5.56%; $n = 11$), and education (5.56%; $n = 11$) were most important.

Respondents were also asked how NOHS could improve their current advocacy efforts. Respondents largely expressed that they did not have much knowledge of NOHS's current advocacy agenda and as a result could not address what could be improved (51.69%; $n = 92$). However, 24.16% ($n = 43$) of the respondents indicated that NOHS should focus their efforts on increasing visibility of the organization and increasing awareness of the field of human services. 6.18% ($n = 11$) would also like to see improved communication between the organization and its

members, and 6.74% (*n* = 12) would like the organization to provide more resources for both members and their clients.

Discussion

The demographic information presented in this discussion has specific implications for NOHS and for the field of human services. First, this information provides understanding of the organization's membership, which can be used in marketing and advertising to increase membership, visibility of the association, and awareness of NOHS. In particular, the survey highlights the importance of recruitment of underrepresented populations, especially males, ethnic minority groups, and those human service professionals living in regions other than the South. Second, by identifying credentials of members, it allows the membership to provide targeted professional development activities for its members. Third, the survey tells us what kinds of advocacy efforts the organization should most likely to focus upon. In particular, it suggests community services, homelessness, mental health issues, and youth issues are of particular interest to its members. Relative to advocacy, the survey suggests that members are not familiar with those efforts NOHS is now taking, and that in general, the association should increase its communication with its members. All of these efforts could improve the visibility of the profession and enhance the quality of services received by clients. Additionally, this information can be useful to those human service programs seeking accreditation through Council for Standards in Human Services Education, which accredits human services education programs (Council for Standards in Human Services Education [CSHSE], 2011, "About CSHSE", para. 1). This study provides understanding of human service professionals' identity, education and credentialing that can serve as a baseline when addressing standard 6: "The combined competencies and disciplines of the faculty for each program shall include both a strong and diverse knowledge base and clinical/practical experience in the delivery of human services to clients" (Council for Standards in Human Services Education [CSHSE], 2011, "National Standards," para. 6). Finally, the information presented in this study provides a platform for future research aimed toward exploring diversity and advocacy within the field.

Though limited in scope, this study adds to the body of knowledge regarding the identity of the human service professional by adding to our understanding of the education, credentials, demographics, and interests of those within the NOHS membership. Additionally, the study has provided useful suggestions for the utilization of findings in the recruitment of NOHS members, conference planning, and expanding communication within the organization. Finally, this study provides information for program faculty to help them understand the varied kinds of educational backgrounds that may be indicative of faculty who typically work in human service education. The information found in this study is important in further clarifying the field and solidifying its position among other helping professions.

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