

A MODEL TRAINING PROGRAM FOR VOLUNTEER  
WORKERS AT LOCAL CONSUMER ACTION CENTERS

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In this paper, a specially designed program for training volunteers to work at local consumer action centers is described and demonstrated. The program makes use of a variety of training resources and techniques, such as videotape, film, role playing, and simulation. A major objective of the program is preparing volunteers to help the poor deal more effectively with their consumer problems.

Program evaluation is now being conducted through an examination of the experiences of 22 volunteers who were trained by the program for positions with the Washtenaw County Consumer Action Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Should the program prove to be successful, it will be made available to consumer action centers in other localities.

The early results of the program evaluation indicate a highly favorable reaction by the student participants as well as the staff with whom they worked at the Washtenaw County Consumer Action Center. Funding for the project is through a \$30,000 Title I HEA grant provided by the Michigan Department of Education.

In the three sections which follow, the objectives and components of the training program are identified, and the student intern experience is briefly described.

## II. CONSUMER ACTION INTERNSHIPS AS AN ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

In recruiting students for the program, we made use of personal interviews and applicant references in an effort to locate students with motivation and sensitivity, as well as social skills and practical experience, which could be built upon in specific ways in the training program. We hoped to get predominantly upper-classmen from

a broad range of academic disciplines. Many avenues of campus publicity were utilized in recruiting students, but undoubtedly the most effective were personal descriptions of the program -- often in a classroom setting by interested faculty or the campus coordinator, sometimes through word-of-mouth communications by students. Listed below are certain characteristics of the 22 students selected as interns.

<u>Class Year</u>		<u>Academic Major</u>		<u>Sex</u>	
Freshman	1	Political Science	7	Male	13
Sophomore	2	Business	4	Female	9
Junior	6	Social Welfare	4		—
Senior	12	Home Economics	2	TOTAL	22
Graduate	1	English	2		
	—	Sociology	2		
TOTAL	22	Geography	1		
		History	1		
		Psychology	1		
		Nursing	1		
		Special Education	1		
			—		
		TOTAL	26	(includes some	double majors)

Selected past experiences of students relevant to internship:

Various types of volunteer counseling (e.g., Crisis Center, peer counseling, Big Brother)	12
Student legal services volunteer	4
Tenants Union	3
Business firm/consumer departments	2

(Also of interest is the large number of students who expressed a desire to get practical experience outside the classroom. The internship program was particularly appealing to them.)

In most cases, three semester hours of independent-study credit were given for the internships. In addition to the work experience, each student was expected to complete an academic project. Thirteen of the projects were supervised by the campus coordinator, and the remaining nine by faculty members from other departments (Economics, Home Economics, Marketing, Political Science, and Sociology). Projects were designed to be of maximum ongoing utility to the Washtenaw County Consumer Action Center.

### III. OBJECTIVES AND COMPONENTS OF THE TRAINING PROGRAM

#### Working Knowledge of Operating Procedures for Handling Consumer Problems in General

- . A staff-prepared, half-hour videotape of an interview with four experienced workers at local consumer agencies. Tape focuses on volunteers and their work. Advice is given on need for objectivity in complaint mediation.
- . A manual of operations for employees of the Washtenaw County Consumer Action Center (CAC).
- . A set of realistic homework problems which draw upon the information presented in the manual of operations, and certain resource materials used by CAC personnel in the processing of consumer complaints and inquiries. Individual feedback sessions were held with each trainee to discuss performance on the homework problems.

#### Social Skills Needed to Use This Knowledge

- . A series of role-playing exercises, performed in a two-hour group session, which focus on the complainant-mediator and mediator-merchant interactions which occur in the processing of consumer complaints by CAC staff members. Students portray consumers, mediators, and merchants. Feedback is given by fellow students, the field coordinator, and the CAC director.

#### Working Knowledge of Operating Procedures for Handling Consumer Problems of the Poor

- . Part I of the two-part, NET documentary film, "The Poor Pay More."
- . A staff-prepared, half-hour videotape of an interview with three employees of the Washtenaw County Citizens Committee for Economic Opportunity (OEO). These OEO staff members compare the consumer problems of the urban poor dramatized in The Poor Pay More with their counterparts in less urbanized Washtenaw County. The complex nature of poverty is emphasized and illustrated.
- . A second set of realistic homework problems, focusing in this instance on the processing of complaints and inquiries likely to be made by poor consumers. Resource materials to be used by the trainee in working on the problems included the film, the videotape, the CAC operations manual and other CAC materials, as well as a literature review of low-income consumer problems published by Louisiana State University (The Unique Problems of Low-Income Consumers by Stephen W. Brown and Lee Richardson). Individual feedback sessions were held with each trainee to discuss performance on the homework problems.

#### Social Skills Needed to Use This Knowledge

- . A second series of role-playing exercises identical to the first except for 1) a focus in this instance on the processing of complaints likely to be registered by low-income consumers, and 2) the addition of OEO staff members to the group of participants in the feedback process.

I. OBJECTIVES OF TRAINING PROGRAM

Knowledge and Skills

Competence Level

Working Knowledge of Operating  
Procedures for Handling Consumer  
Problems in General

— T R A I N I N G —

Social Skills Needed to  
Use This Knowledge

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Working Knowledge of Operating  
Procedures for Handling Consumer  
Problems of the Poor

P R O G R A M

Social Skills Needed to  
Use This Knowledge

\_\_\_\_\_

Level of  
Competence  
Sufficient  
to Begin  
Work as  
an Agency  
Volunteer  
on Problems  
of Consumers  
in General and  
Low-Income  
Consumers in  
Particular