

Saint Peter's University

Capstone Projects in the Master of Public Administration (MPA) Program

As a culmination of their studies, MPA students undertake capstone projects to solve local public policy problems. These projects are not merely classroom exercises, but rather initiatives that can help local government and non-profit organizations choose between a course of actions, evaluate current programs, and improve the services they provide to the public. Below is a short description of some recent capstone projects.

HEALTH

Stigma of Mental Health Counseling

One in four American between the ages of 18 and 24 is living with some form of mental illness. The impetus for this study was to explore if the stigma associated with mental health counseling plays a part in delaying or preventing students from seeking help on the campus of Saint Peter's University. To gain a better understanding of the issues, an anonymous survey of 219 undergraduate students was conducted asking them about their knowledge of mental health issues, availability of mental health services, and their perspectives about those who receive help. 63% of students surveyed answered 'yes' when asked if they believed there was a stigma associated with students seeking mental health services on campus. Staff in 28 counseling centers at private and public colleges across the state of New Jersey were also surveyed. Most of the staff at the counseling centers reported that educating faculty was an important element in combating the stigma related to mental health on their campus. The study identified strategic efforts to combat the stigma of mental health counseling on campuses and to make mental health services more accessible to everyone.

YOUTH AND FAMILY SERVICES

Homeless Families in Hudson County

The most recent government-sponsored homeless count revealed that over 827 men, women and children were homeless on a single night in Hudson County. Over 100 were members of families with at least one adult and one child under the age of eighteen. This count appears to have severely under-represented families who are homeless, but do not access the homeless service system. Most homeless families are hidden, usually doubled up living with friends or relatives. Given the large number of families and the number of contributing factors causing it, family homelessness could be considered a wicked problem - a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of the interconnected nature of problems. This project began with the expectation that an obtainable solution would be identified, but the researchers realized half-way through their study that there was no true

solution to this problem. However, there are ways to help, and this capstone project provides recommendations that can assist in improving the homeless family epidemic in Hudson County.

Adolescent Suicide

Adolescent suicide is the third leading cause of death in children and young adults between the ages of 10 and 24 in New Jersey. Since 2002, the suicide rate has increased by 40 percent in the state. The desire to commit suicide stems from mental health conditions that usually present themselves through depression and anxiety. Since suicide is not any easy topic to discuss even when one may be thinking that a person is at risk, it is often avoided. The students created sensitive and useful information that would be made available to young people, in order to help reduce the frequency of youthful suicide.

Services for Expectant Mothers

This paper addressed the growing disparities between native-born mothers and foreign-born mothers in the utilization of federal support programs for expectant mothers in the Newark Community Health Centers. This paper focuses on foreign-born mothers who are considered non-immigrant (temporary tourist, student, or work visa) and the barriers that they face because of their lack of knowledge about federally funded programs that are available to them. Recommendations to address these barriers include (1) improved communication between expectant mothers and government officials (2) mandated education of assistance programs and (3) stricter regulations.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Drug-Free School Zones

The Drug-Free School Zone law in New Jersey has caused a spike in incarceration over the last 30 years. This law has had a greater impact in urban areas compared to rural and suburban areas because more people live and work near urban schools. Since minorities tend to live in urban areas, they are disproportionately impacted by this law. It creates an injustice because the law's impact is determined by race, socio-economics and where one lives, not on the crime committed. Drug-Free School Zone convictions exacerbate the overall problem of mass incarceration because of the mandatory minimum sentences. The original goal of this capstone project was to find a viable alternative to the law and write a persuasive paper that would encourage legislation to create a more equitable system. Unfortunately, the research and interviews revealed that there is very little political sympathy for "drug dealers." Although some elected officials acknowledged the inequity of the law, they also explained that their constituency would never support "being softer on drug crimes" at the possible detriment to children in the community. Nevertheless, this research introduces several recommendations to improve the law.

Improving Relationship Between Police and African Americans

In the last few years there has been intense media coverage on police brutality and the African American community, but in reality there has always been a poor relationship between African Americans and law enforcement. A survey revealed that most Jersey City residents consider police relations with the African American community to be within a range of fair to poor. Respondents indicated that trust and communication between the officers and the community is the most important element when it comes to

developing better police relations. Based on the survey and a series of one-on-one interviews with police officers, social issues (e.g., housing, employment, education, lack of activities) and a lack of sufficient diversity on the police force contribute to the problem. The study recommended that police policies be re-evaluated and that police undergo additional training on dealing with the public.

Help for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

This capstone project addresses barriers to formerly incarcerated individuals in Jersey City's Ward A and Ward F. Through location-based research methods at the community level, discussions with subject matter experts, and an analysis of best practices and reentry literature, this paper makes a set of recommendations in hopes of better supporting formerly incarcerated individuals on their journey home. Cultural, geographic and legal issues were uncovered that posed barriers to a successful reentry journey for formerly incarcerated men and women in these communities. Although the barriers were neither major nor insurmountable, the combination of barriers experienced by this population causes a widespread hindrance to reintegration into society, and particularly into these communities. Although a robust network of specialized services is available to the formerly incarcerated, a lack of knowledge of these services appears to be widespread. The most significant and also the most easily solvable problem uncovered was difficulty obtaining a valid form of identification; this created barriers for employment, mobility and utilization of traditional financial institutions. Men and women also reported a lack of familial support, which impacted housing situations, reduced morale, and created a greater risk of recidivism. To address these barriers, this study recommends a three pronged approach of communication, legislation, and spiritual inspiration.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Human Trafficking in New York City

There are more people enslaved today than any other time in human history. Most of them are not bonded in shackles and chains – at least not in the literal sense. Today's slave is most likely a young person with limited or no familial support, and a lack of legitimate options to live a productive and self-sustaining life. They are exploited by predators for their labor, and often forced into illegal activities in order to survive. For years, youth forced to engage in prostitution were often neglected, and in many cases, treated with contempt and charged with crimes of prostitution. The victims were being punished, while the predators were making profits. This capstone project focused on the problem of human trafficking in New York City and the homeless youth population. There is a direct connection between being a homeless youth and being a victim of human trafficking. In fact, it is estimated that nearly 1 in 5 homeless youth are involved in human trafficking. Solutions to this problem focused on reducing youth homelessness which is the key to reducing human trafficking.

Sexual Harassment at Pakistan Universities

Gender-based crimes and violations are the most prevalent, yet easily overseen issues pertaining to a student's campus life. Embarrassing, shocking, frightening, and degrading incidents related to sexual harassment and sexual assault can leave life-long consequences in terms of physical, professional, personal, and psychological problems. Surprisingly, in Pakistan there are no specific anti-sexual harassment policies for the students' protection, and sexual assault cases are dealt with according to the

judicial system set for rape crimes. Interviews with senior university administrators in Pakistan revealed that the universities in Pakistan are not required to have anti-sexual harassment policies. A survey of Pakistani students found a wide-spread ignorance about university procedures and actions to deal with this problem. This paper concludes by identifying recommendations to help combat the critical and often ignored issue of sexual harassment at Pakistan universities.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Disaster Preparedness for Disabled Individuals in Hudson County

The purpose of this capstone project is to highlight the general lack of knowledge and disaster preparedness on the part of individuals with disabilities in Hudson County. This research effort also makes recommendations to improve communication accessibility/information dissemination at three Hudson County offices: Regional Health Commission, Office of Disability Services, and Office of Emergency Management. Nearly 60,000 Hudson County residents have one or more disabilities ranging from vision loss and mobility impairments to schizophrenia and other mental health illnesses. Individuals with disabilities have a general lack of awareness in disaster preparedness, due in part to the shortcomings on the county level in effectively communicating information to individuals with disabilities before, during, and after disaster situations. Hudson County can improve its disaster communications performance by implementing three solutions: (a) involving the agencies that already work for individuals with disabilities, (b) reworking the entire emergency guidelines through consultation with individuals with disabilities, (c) creating a disaster preparedness campaign targeted at individuals with disabilities.

COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

Awareness of Hudson County Senior Citizens Programs

Hudson County is fortunate to have numerous programs for senior citizens such as Meals on Wheels, Senior Farmer's Market Vouchers, and Senior Nutrition Sites. Programs are not the problem, getting the information to seniors about available programs is the problem. There are two senses used when spreading information—sight and hearing. Unfortunately, these two senses are greatly affected by age. The problems can creep up so slowly but there are methods to control and sometimes correct them. This capstone project recommends ways that technology can improve the dissemination of information about the county's senior citizen's programs.

State Police Social Media Policy

Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter offer law enforcement agencies a unique opportunity to communicate and establish more trusting relationships with communities. Due to the lack of a social media policy, the New Jersey State Police is not communicating with the public as effectively as it could. Social media can also be used in case of emergencies, to notify the public of crimes in an area, to ask the community for help in solving crimes, and for community outreach. A proposal for creating a social media policy was developed for the State Police that will prove mutually advantageous for the residents of the state as well as the municipal and state law enforcement agencies. It is more important,

now than ever, to bridge any perceived gap effect between the law enforcement community and the people it serves, and one of the most powerful tools that can be used to affect this communication is social media.

TRANSPORTATION

Hudson County Jitneys

In New Jersey, jitney buses can be seen on many streets such as Kennedy Boulevard, Newark Avenue, Bergenline Avenue, and the Journal Square transportation hub. These buses provide convenient services at low fares. Residents, however, have voiced concerns and complaints regarding these services. Jitneys became more controversial in the wake of an accident that killed an 8- month-old baby girl and sent seven others to a hospital. Other complaints associated with jitneys include the following: traffic congestion; lack of identifiable bus stops and route information; limited accountability, lack of insurance coverage to cover accident victims, inferior vehicle maintenance, and vehicles not operating in compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act. This capstone project proposes several options that can be used to resolve the existing problems. A key recommendation is to create a medallion system for jitneys similar to that used by taxicabs in other areas. This would improve service, vehicle quality, traffic flow, and information provided to the public.

Bicycle Route from Florida to Maine

Jersey City has become a shining example of how a city, blighted by the economic and social malaise engendered by a post-industrial and post-manufacturing economy, could rise from the ashes reborn. A system of linear parks, crisscrossing the city, has been designated as a part of the East Coast Greenway, a 3,000-mile park system that connects communities up and down the East Coast. The one and only gap in the entire system is the portion that runs along the Lincoln Highway-Hackensack River Bridge connecting Jersey City to Kearny Point, Newark and beyond. This paper recommends ways to better integrate the Jersey City portion with the entire Greenway.

EDUCATION

Teaching Children About the 9/11 Attack

If you were five years old or older on September 11, 2001, chances are you have some memory of the worst terrorist attack in American history. This project aimed to help teachers properly educate the next generation of Americans about the historical events that took place on 9/11 and extract lessons from that day that will have positive impacts. The project focused on developing a program for 5th grade students in Atlantic City. To obtain information, students were surveyed, roundtable discussions held with teachers and administrators, and relevant literature was analyzed. There are many challenges to teaching 9/11 to students in the classroom including: no standard curriculum, lack of knowledge or support for the teachers, timing of the school year in which this topic will be introduced, lack of financial resources, and uncertainty about which is the best medium to use. There is also concern from educators about sensitivities related to students with diverse upbringings, especially toward those from Muslim or Middle Eastern backgrounds. Although these are significant challenges, the effort toward learning

positive lessons from 9/11 appears to outweigh any potential difficulties. In order to fully incorporate the lessons of 9/11, the capstone students developed a “Teacher’s Toolkit” for 9/11 curriculum resources.

English as a Second Language (ESL) and Bilingual High School Programs

This paper analyzes some of the major problems in both English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual high school programs in five Hudson County high schools. These programs face a number of challenges including: limited number of seats available in ESL classes, preparing students for state testing, newly arrived illiterate immigrants, students learning English when they speak another language outside the classroom, and the lack of programs for languages that are widely spoken, such as Arabic. Solutions to these problems are broken down into seven main components: (1) revise laws about bilingual programs so that school systems cannot easily evade them with waivers, (2) increase salaries for ESL certified teachers, (3) tailor classes for children who arrive in the U.S. as children, (4) partner with local colleges to audit classes and start summer programs, (5) maintain open sections of ESL for students who enter throughout the year, (6) revise standards so that international students do not need to take state tests upon their immediate arrival to this country, and (7) revise guidelines so that state tests are given a lower priority in teacher evaluations.

COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENTS

Jersey City Park

To the passerby, 16th Street Park in Jersey City appears to be no more than a fenced-in lot. The purpose of this capstone paper is to recommend improvements for this public space. The problem was precisely defined and the present state of the 16th Street Park documented in detail. Along with a literature review, city experts were interviewed, and neighborhood surveys conducted. Several promising alternatives for the 16th Street Park were then identified, evaluated and compared.

Street Cats

In the past few years, the Jersey City Bureau of Animal Control has frequently reported the prevalence of cats on Bidwell Avenue in Jersey City. In order to fully understand all aspects of the situation, the study began by counting the number of cats on Bidwell Avenue and its adjoining streets. A survey was then administered to find out the following: (a) if area pet owners neutered all their pets, and if not, why (b) what were residents’ attitudes towards street cats, and (c) where were the cats coming from and how were they surviving. In addition to the survey, other data was collected through interviews with relevant parties, a literature review and a best practice review. In light of the findings, the following recommendations were made: (1) the Bureau of Animal Control should conduct a targeted trap-neuter-release program for the area; (2) Animal Control should coordinate its low-cost public programs with the non-profit organization, Liberty Humane Society, to ensure areas with documented street-cat problems can benefit from their events; (3) all area pet owners should be informed of pet owner assistance programs available to low-income individuals.