

## **The Poverty Simulator: Experiential Learning for Family and Consumer Sciences Students**

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*Experiential learning has been identified as a powerful teaching tool to enhance learning among university students. To foster a greater understanding of individuals and families who live in poverty, and their daily struggles and stressors, students had the opportunity to participate in the “Community Action Poverty Simulation” (CAPS). The positive outcomes of the project were measured by verbal and written feedback from faculty and students. Students reported having an increased awareness of the prevalence of poverty, a greater understanding of how various social service and government agencies aim to assist those in poverty, and a deeper awareness of how poverty affects family functioning. Based on the success of the project, CAPS may be considered a “Promising Practice.”*

The field of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) encompasses a broad range of areas aimed at improving the lives of individuals and their families. Family and consumer sciences students can gain knowledge through traditional classroom learning; however, experiential learning experiences can help to show how principles apply in real world settings. Such experiences help students meet Standard 2 set forth by the National Association of Teacher Educators for Family and Consumer Sciences. Standard 2 states students should “use resources responsibly to address the diverse needs and goals of individuals, families, and communities in family and consumer sciences areas such as resource management, consumer economics, financial literacy, living environments, and textiles and apparel” (Erickson, Fox & Stewart, 2010, p. 75). The purpose of CAPS was twofold: First, to use experiential learning help students appreciate the struggles of those who live in poverty, and second, to introduce students to the variety of resources available to help those who live in poverty.

### **Literature Review**

Carl Rogers and H. Jerome Freiberg, supporters of the humanistic approach, believed that experiential learning is necessary for subjective conversion and personal growth and that all humans have the natural propensity to learn (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). In order for this type of learning to be most beneficial, the principles of experiential learning must be incorporated into the carefully chosen program.

According to the Association of Experiential Education [AEE], experiential learning principles should begin with the structure of the program. The structure must force the student to decide on, and be responsible for, moral choices. Next, the experience must be supported by the acute examination of one’s personal reflection. The student must consistently be engaged in problem solving and creativity, as well as being able to place meaning to what they have learned. The student must also perceive the scenario tasks as realistic and this can only be done if they are

actively experiencing emotional, social, and logical stimulation. Last, the educator must remember outcomes won't always turn out as predicted, but the experience will give everyone an opportunity to explore their own pre-conceived values, biases, and attitudes (AEE, n.d.).

In the United States, where Americans seem to have become desensitized to, and have created pre-conceptions of, people who live in poverty, this is especially important. Those who have never faced having insufficient basic life necessities have begun to label poverty's ever changing struggles and needs as insignificant. The face of poverty is not just the "drunk bum" on the corner, or the "drug addict" up the street, or even the family that grew up on welfare and continues because it is "easier" than working (Castillo & Becerra, 2012). In reality, according to 2013 census data, there are 45.3 million people in the United States who are at or under the poverty level and, of them, 19.9 percent (9.02 million) are children (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Family models of every distinction have been severely affected by the current recession. This phenomenon has created a new group, the working poor. According to Bishaw (2012), there are 10.4 million working people and families still living below the poverty level. Because there is a significant number of families living in poverty, it is important that students understand the realities of poverty so that they may better help those in need.

### **Experiential Learning Experience-The Poverty Simulation**

#### **Overview**

Though the CAPS simulation (Missouri Association for Community Action, 2012) takes approximately four hours to complete, it is necessary to spend time planning and preparing for the event. For example, the simulation may accommodate hundreds of individuals, and on a large scale, may take several weeks to secure volunteers, participants, and a venue to hold the simulation. For this classroom-based simulation, time spent preparing for the simulation was considerably less. On the day of the simulation, students are first assigned a role as part of a family. They can either be an "adult" or a "child." The students also receive a written description of their particular family situation, including their family's income, housing, debts and budget. Roles include those who are more likely to live with poverty, such as a single mother with several children, a disabled Veteran, an elderly couple on a fixed income, recovering addicts, a father with a chronically ill child, a woman with no education, and a man caring for his mentally handicapped sibling.

Throughout four 15-minute "weeks," the students must seek services from various social service agencies, churches, schools, banks, stores and pawn shops in order to maintain their homes and family life. During this time, the students become aware of the struggles and stressor of living in poverty, those in the role of "child" will learn the difficulties of living with the uncertainty and peer pressure of poverty.

At the end of the fourth "week," students gathered to discuss their experiences. Topics of discussion included: how they were treated by the various service providers, how they felt when services were closed, ideas of how they wanted to make their particular situations better, and how they, as students, may have changed their perception of poverty.

#### **Participants**

Students and faculty (N=42) were assigned to one of two types of participants in the simulation. The first were those who lived in poverty, and the second were those who provided services to the people in poverty, or other community representatives. Community representatives included: social service workers, clinical social workers, police officers, bill

collectors, teachers, and health care professionals. Each service provider had instructions on what their role was, how to do their job, and when to open and close their stations. The service providers were also able to decide how they wanted to behave. For example, some service providers chose to behave with empathy toward the families, while others projected a very harsh and negative attitude. Students assumed the roles of adults and children in poverty, and faculty members assumed the roles of service providers and community representatives.

### **Running the Simulation**

Students were told that their goal was to maintain their home and family life throughout 4- 15 minutes “weeks.” First, they received a name tag with their fictitious name, age, gender, and their picture. The entire family also received a packet of information that was used to simulate their lives. The information noted things such as if they owned vehicles, had bank accounts (and how much money was in the accounts), owned appliances, furniture, jewelry, etc. Some families may also have had “money” in their packets, while others received unemployment or disability checks, or participated in social service programs such as “Women Infants and Children (WIC) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). All of these “assets” could have been sold or pawned if needed. Other families may have been homeless, single parents, teen parents, or any other demographic that struggled with low income. Also, as in any daily life, there were “Luck of the Draw Cards” which were handed out at random and either made a family’s life better or worse. For example, a card may have told the family they were being evicted, their car broke down, they incurred a medical expense, or a family member turned to drugs. The packets also contained lists, forms, or applications, homework, paychecks, opportunity or bad news cards, “guns,” “handcuffs,” “drugs,” or “medical supplies.”

The simulation facilitator kept track of the time, and blew a whistle to signal the beginning of a new “week.” The facilitator answered questions throughout the simulation, but did not provide advice or guidance to the “adults” or “children,” in order to help the simulation be as real as possible.

At the end of the “fourth week,” the facilitator signaled the end of the simulation and the beginning of the debriefing and discussion process. Students spent approximately one hour discussing various elements of the simulation with a faculty member. Students and faculty also completed evaluative tools to assess the effectiveness of the simulation.

### **Evaluation, Outcomes and Conclusion**

In order to evaluate the process and outcomes of the simulator, students and faculty were asked to complete informal, anonymous, pre and post-simulator questionnaires that were developed by the simulator’s facilitator. Because the questionnaires were intended to be an informal assessment of the simulator, they were very basic in design and asked only two questions: (1) individuals who live in poverty are not trying hard enough to better their lives, and (2) my community has enough resources to help individuals living in poverty better their lives. Each statement was answered as “reflects or somewhat reflects what I believe,” “doesn’t reflect what I believe,” or “don’t know.” Because the simulator was used as a semester classroom-based project, IRB approval was not necessary; however, faculty plan to run the simulator with a larger number of students and community members in the future. At that time, a more detailed assessment tool will be developed and IRB approval will be secured prior to the event. Faculty look forward to having more data to share in the near future.

During the current simulation, many respondents (n= 38) changed their perception of poverty from the beginning of the simulation to the end of the simulation. Eighty-nine percent of respondents (n=34) indicated having a better understanding of the challenges associated with living in poverty after the simulation, such as having to choose between paying a doctor's bill and paying for electricity. Students shared they developed an understanding of the economy and how supportive programs, such as WIC and SNAP are administered. Students left the simulation feeling more educated about poverty and what they could do to manage their personal resources better.

All students and faculty indicated they learned a lot about poverty from the simulation. One faculty member stated that the simulation "truly opened her eyes" about the challenges associated with living in poverty. Another faculty member shared that because of the simulation, he wanted to "get out there and help the community." One student shared that she would no longer "look down" on people who use assistance to purchase groceries because she now understood the purpose and limitations of those programs.

The poverty simulation was an effective learning experience, not only for students, but for faculty and community members. By using an experiential learning experience to reinforce classroom teaching, students became more informed about the hardships associated with poverty and services available to those who struggle with poverty.

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### **Citation**

Kihm, H. & Knapp, S. (2015). The poverty simulator: Experiential learning for family and consumer sciences students. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences Education*, 31(2), 24-28. Available at <http://www.natefacs.org/Pages/v32no1/v32no1KihmSimulator.pdf>