

The Profession that Makes a Difference: Report on Developmental Services Worker Program Survey

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Introduction

The goal of the DSSIG is to enhance and promote the profession of directly supporting people with a developmental disability. As part of this goal, the DSSIG is working to support recruitment and retention. To carry out this goal, the DSSIG has created 2 committees, the Education and Training Committee and the Enhancing the Profession Committee.

The Enhancing the Profession Committee chose as its starting point to investigate why individuals enter into the profession of working with people who have developmental disabilities. This would provide us with an understanding of how the profession is viewed by the general public as well as the most appealing/positive aspects of the profession that attract people to it.

Developing the DSW Survey Project

For its first step, the Enhancing the Profession Committee surveyed a specific population, namely students in the Developmental Services Worker Programs in colleges across Ontario.

The rationale for choosing this population was twofold:

1. these students presumably have made a career decision to work with this client population
2. these students are relatively easy to access in order to conduct the survey

The Developmental Services Worker Program specifically prepares its graduates to work in a variety of settings with people who have developmental disabilities. Currently, the Program is delivered at 10 Colleges at Ontario as follows:

- ❖ Algonquin
- ❖ Cambrian
- ❖ Centennial
- ❖ Confederation
- ❖ Fanshawe
- ❖ Georgian
- ❖ Humber
- ❖ La Cite

- ❖ Loyalist
- ❖ Northern
- ❖ St. Clair
- ❖ St. Lawrence

Program options which are offered include the Regular 2 year Diploma Program and the 1 year Accelerated Diploma Program delivered on campus, as well as distance education and off campus course offerings. The Program is available in English and French.

The Survey Content

It was decided to develop a survey which was brief and specific. This would increase the likelihood that the surveys would be returned and would also facilitate the completion by French speaking DSW students.

The survey was comprised of the following 2 questions:

Question One: Why did you enrol in the DSW Program?

Question Two: What do you plan to do after you finish your DSW? (work in the field; go on to other education; etc.)

The Survey Process

The survey was distributed electronically to the 10 colleges listed above with DSW Programs. The surveys were returned in hard copy by mail or electronically. Students were requested to voluntarily complete the surveys. In some cases, students received extra marks in a specific course for completing the survey. In no case were students punished if they did not complete the survey.

590 students returned the surveys from **8** of the colleges. **26** of the survey responses (4.4%) were in French and the remainder were in English.

The Committee met and scanned about 25% of the completed surveys to establish general patterns of the responses. These patterns were used to create categories within which to record the answers. 4 Committee members each reviewed approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of the surveys and classified the answers into these categories. In some cases, a respondent gave more than 1 answer to a question, so the total number of total responses for each question is greater than the actual number of respondents.

Survey Results

Why do students enter the DSW Program?

The statistical summary of the survey responses is indicated in Table One.

Table1: Responses to Question One

<i>Response</i>	<i>Number</i>
1. Family member with a disability	70
2. To help others	171
3. Previous work or volunteer experience	13
4. Co-op experience with special needs students	49
5. Want to make a difference, enhance the quality of life of people with disabilities	129
6. Knew somebody working or volunteering in the DS field	49
7. Want a rewarding/satisfying career	80
8. Lots of opportunities for employment	48
9. To gain knowledge/skills/credentials for current job	76
10. Couldn't get into Program of choice, so took DSW Program	29
11. TOTAL	854

There are some major themes regarding why students have entered the DSW Program:

1. **A Humanitarian Motivation:** It is evident that these students have a strong desire for a meaningful career in which they help others. Some of them stated that they “had a calling” for this type of work or felt in their heart that this was the right thing to do. They wanted a career which gave them the opportunity to work with people and give back to society. There is also an acknowledgement that this career is personally satisfying.
2. **Helping People with Disabilities:** 129 responses stated that the students felt it was important specifically to help people with disabilities. Many responses referred to enhancing quality of life and helping people who are less fortunate.
3. **Life/Work/Volunteer/Co-op Experience:** Another major factor was having exposure to people with developmental disabilities. 132 responses indicated that the student had a family member with a disability, had done some sort of volunteer/co-op, or had work experience. Therefore, it is reasonable to state that providing people with the opportunity to get to know this population is critical to encouraging them to enter the profession.

4. Knowing Someone Working in the Field: Another source of information about the DSW Program is people who work in the developmental services field. If current staff are positive about their jobs, they are a great source of the “word of mouth” promotion.
5. Upgrading for Current Job: 76 students were already working in the field and wanted to increase their skills/knowledge. There were 2 main reasons for this: either their employers were requiring upgrading or they personally wanted to be more effective on the job.
6. Good Employment Opportunities: On a practical level, some students chose the DSW Program since they knew that there were lots of jobs available for its graduates.

A pattern emerges regarding the students who take the DSW Program. These students:

- ❖ want to help others
- ❖ are familiar with people with developmental disabilities
- ❖ understand that this is a career in which they can make a difference, find significant personal satisfaction, and obtain employment

Where do DSW Students Want to Work upon Graduation?

Table 2 indicates what these students want to do when they graduate.

Table 2: Responses to Question 2

<i>Response</i>	<i>Number</i>
1. Work in the DS field	251
2. Work as an EA	182
3. Go on to complete ECE or CYW & work in those fields	58
4. Go on to get B Ed & become a teacher	60
5. Work in DS for a while & then continue education in DS	114
6. Work in autism services	32
7. Go on to further education & work in another field (nursing, speech therapy, physiotherapy)	106
8. Start my own agency/start new services	15
9. TOTAL	818

From the perspective of the DSSIG, it is encouraging to note that the majority of the students do plan to work in developmental services.

1. 380 (46%) will work in the field (answer categories 1, 5, 8)
2. Another 214 (26%) responses indicate that people want to work in the related fields of Educational Assistant or Autism services.
3. 224 (27%) plan to go on to other educational programs and careers. (answer categories 3, 4, 7)

We must be cautious in interpreting these results. Obviously, many people have given more than 1 response. Therefore, some of those who will work in the developmental services field upon graduation might move on sooner or later.

What is encouraging is the fact that the fact majority of the students will work in careers where their understanding of and skills to support people with developmental disabilities will positively impact on these people.

What Can We Learn from this Survey?

This survey has provided us with a valuable source of information, which can be of use in several ways.

Enhancing the Profession

How can we use these responses to enhance the developmental services profession?

- ❖ It is crucial to develop information packages that clearly describe what this profession is. We should emphasize that the profession offers opportunities to:
 - Make a difference in the lives of others
 - Gain significant personal satisfaction
 - Learn and use specialized skills and knowledge
 - Help people with a variety of special needs and disabilities to have better lives
 - Become employed in a variety of roles
- ❖ We can enhance this profession by gathering and disseminating stories from people working in the field and from people receiving services. These stories can speak to:
 - How the professionals have made a difference in the lives of the people they support
 - The types of jobs they have held (residential counsellor, community job facilitator, etc.)
 - Specific examples of what the professionals have gained from working in this field

- ❖ People who already work in the field can act as valuable spokes people for the profession. We can:
 - Maximize the opportunities for them to promote the profession through posting articles and sound clips on web sites, disseminating their stories through newsletters and brochures, etc.
 - Ensure that people working in the field are aware of the DSW Programs and know how to refer others to them

Recruiting People into the Developmental Services Field

Knowing why people have entered the DSW Program, we can disseminate our information about the profession to specific target groups:

- ❖ Families who have a member with a developmental disability
- ❖ Volunteers in developmental or related services
- ❖ Respite workers
- ❖ Special Services at Home Workers
- ❖ Agencies providing developmental or related services
- ❖ Staff already working in the field who want to upgrade their skills
- ❖ Grade eight students who are starting to realize that they want a career where they make a difference
- ❖ Guidance counsellors/co-op placement teachers in the high schools who are aware of students who want a career in which they help others
- ❖ High school students
- ❖ Faith groups and other social service agencies

A variety of information packages can be developed which target specific groups.

For high school students, we can appeal to their burgeoning commitment to a meaningful career. All our marketing with high school students should focus on this theme. We can assume that most of them will not know what Developmental Services means. We should make the connection for them and peak their interest. For example, we can use language such as “Do you want to make a difference – Developmental Services is for you!”

For volunteers, we can let them know that, if they enjoy their volunteer work, there is a wonderful career in the area which they could enter.

It is crucial that all of our information is very specific with respect to:

- ❖ The fact that this is a *profession*
- ❖ The opportunities this profession offers to *help others* and *make a difference*

As well, it would be helpful to communicate with gatekeepers such as co-op placement teachers and agencies about maximizing opportunities for people to get to know individuals with developmental disabilities in positive settings.

Retaining People in the Developmental Services Field

This survey did not focus on retention issues. However, it would appear to be reasonable to assume that we will retain people in the field if they are able to satisfy the motivations that brought them into the field in the first place.

Therefore, agencies can assist by ensuring that:

- ❖ Staff can spend the majority of their time directly supporting individuals
- ❖ Staff receive consistent feedback from supervisors, agencies, peers, and individuals regarding the positive difference they are making. Working on a daily basis, staff may lose sight of the important role they play. Identifying and acknowledging this can increase retention.

In Conclusion

The students in the DSW Programs have a definite focus on a career that makes a difference for other people. Most of them are in the Program because they have had opportunities to hear about this profession and/or because they know someone with a developmental disability. They have a positive view of this profession based upon their life experiences. We can use this understanding to develop strategies to enhance the profession, and thus encourage people to enter and remain in developmental services.

For more Information on this report contact Jo Anne Nugent at JoAnne.Nugent@humber.ca

Thanks to all the members of the DSSIG who worked on this report:

Terry Elliott, Mary Centre, Toronto
Philip Hamerlik Region of Peel Case Management Services, Mississauga
Michelle Stein, Optimum Support Service, Chatham
Carole Van Der Voort, Developmental Services Access Centre, Kitchener