Developing & Maintaining Self-care Practices for First Generation Social Work Students of Color: A Curriculum Against Rest Inequality (CARI)

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Abstract:

Social work students of color often face a cultural mismatch of interdependency and independence, where being busy as much as possible is viewed as a means of success. What is not discussed is the impact of experiencing burnout and being exposed to systematic oppression when having an oppressed upbringing causes direct challenges in the retention of social workers. The hustle work ethic is instilled in first-generation students more prevalently, where they feel as though they need to pick up long hours or get involved with additional commitments.

This curriculum's four modules highlight and demonstrate that having a supportive, resourceful community adds value to one's self-care practices, resulting in a livelier output of retention and lower susceptibility to burnout. Recommendations for policy, practice, and advocacy include the implementation of sustainable practices and their value to the social work profession. Considerations of intersectionality and CRT are also implied.

Introduction:

First-generation social workers of color come into the profession with different insider knowledge and experience on their cultural practices and transitions. They hold valuable insights into the society around them and represent themselves in their families and communities. Social workers aim to enhance people's lives and help them meet their basic needs, focusing on the individual and the societal context. Regardless of the social worker's specialization or expertise, the profession comprises several aspects such as direct practice with individuals or groups, community assessment and change, advocacy, education, or policy implementation (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021).

The purpose of this self-directed curriculum is for first-generation social work students of color to learn to successfully practice self-care and boost their social capital within their community. Understanding oneself and acting with intentionality serve as a way to work from the heart outward, filled with genuine motives and pure authenticity.

Methods:

This curriculum was developed to address the strengths and hurdles first-generation social work students of color encounter. These specific intersecting identities of their lives often pose challenges when navigating higher education and throughout their careers.

First-generation women of color experience increased social class awareness and report not feeling a sense of belonging (Jackson et al., 2022).First generation students, LGBTQIA+ students and students with disabilities report disproportionately higher levels of fear of negative evaluation in contrast to their peers (Busch et al., 2023). Students of color experience more difficulties integrating and developing their community, with several students reporting feeling unsupported by their school (Hussain & Jones, 2021). Not only is the demand for social workers increasing soon (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024), but there has been an increase in social work graduates who are first-generation students of color (Fitzhugh Mullan Institute for Health Workforce Equity & The George Washington University, 2020).

This self-directed curriculum, C.A.R.I. – Curriculum Against Rest Inequality, is designed **for first-generation social work students of color**. It was designed to be accessible to students in any social work program- bachelor's, master's, or doctorate level. This resource's overall aim and intention is for students to become **aware of the impacts of rest inequality** and how to combat it. Developing and maintaining self-care practices will not only be beneficial on a personal level but will also translate into the lives of working professionals and sustain themselves in their career paths.

Description of Proposed Project:

Implementation

All schools of social work must promote the practice and benefits of self-care, making the curriculum accessible to social work students through an online accessible document or a printed version at no charge for students. Students should be encouraged to participate in C.A.R.I. throughout the semester or quarter, affirming that it can be started at any time during the program. C.A.R.I.'s format is designed to be self-instructional, meaning that participants must take charge and be accountable for their instruction and progression through the curriculum.

Students can access the curriculum digitally and complete it via a mobile device, such as a tablet, as well as print out a hard copy for the opportunity to physically read and write onto the curriculum pages. Because self-care is subjective to each student, different activities may meet their needs, requiring various materials. Having access to the Internet will allow the student to research and implement local activities that can be integrated into their self-care plan.

Objectives of C.A.R.I
1) Educate, inform, and raise awareness among first-generation social work students of color about their susceptibility to rest inequality.
2) Provide students with the opportunity to reflect on the impact that rest inequality is having on them during their time in school.
3) Encourage and promote accessible self-care activities that benefit the well-being of students.
4) Provide knowledge on implementing methods to uphold consistent self-care activities for long-term impact.

Evaluation

Before beginning the curriculum, students will be asked to take a pre-test to evaluate their current self-care practices and reflect on their practices and the impact of these practices. At the end of the curriculum, students will have the chance to participate, provide feedback, and reflect on their experience with C.A.R.I. with a post-test.

To evaluate the ultimate goal of C.A.R.I., the curriculum is aligned with the Kirkpatrick Model of Learning Evaluation (Kurt, 2016). The four levels of learning are identified as:
- Level 1: Awareness
- Level 2: Knowledge and understanding
- Level 3: Skill application
- Level 4: Skill acquisition resulting in behavior change

C.A.R.I. is intended to guide students to Level 3, where they can apply what they are learning about their practices, themselves, and the curriculum to create sustainable selfcare practices. Evaluating at Levels 1 and 2 will be measured by pre-post tests. A combination of self-reported behavior changes will measure Level 3 via follow-up surveys and reflections in self-care plans. These self-care plans will include students' measurable goals, burnout and stress indicators, and rating scales that reflect the students' concerns. As it is a self-directed curriculum, students are able to engage with the material independently and proceed at their own pace. Depending on their individual needs and circumstances, students may take their time digesting material and incorporating changes into their lifestyle.

Implications:

Social Work Policy, Practice, and Advocacy

C.A.R.I. reveals implications for agencies and programs to promote an adequate balance between the intensive profession of social work and the energy required from students and new social workers. Beyond personal practice, agencies and institutions must instill changes in the work environment, caseload, and system. As students balance their life obligations and enter into the profession in their practicums, first-generation social work students of color should be able to implement self-care without guilt for prioritizing themselves. Healthy workplace environments and the value of self-care allow students and new social workers to sustain their practices and avoid burnout or increasing turnover rates. Throughout C.A.R.I., students shift the main priority toward themselves, which is the first step towards self-advocacy. Self-advocacy allows students to speak on and address their own needs, which further benefits toward advocating for the population served.

Advocacy Regarding Intersectionality and CRT

Beyond completing the curriculum development, individualism, the concept that people should be able to make it independently without help (Okun, 2021), was the reoccurring concept that found itself against reflections and activities of C.A.R.I. Objectives of C.A.R.I. were focused on understanding one's connections and social capital, which further reminded students about their support throughout their journey. This support may range from their family members, close friends, or academic and outside influences, and concludes that students do not feel guilty for requiring help. While individualism is centered around just one individual, CRT centers around the contexts of an individual and the communities involved. The critical race theory tenet that applies within the curriculum is the idea of race and racism as social constructs (Duignan, 2024). C.A.R.I. aims to widen the perspectives of both ideas, encouraging students to stay connected with their support while enhancing a healthy and balanced work environment. Students can expand on ties with the social capital while receiving positive messages from their agencies or programs for encouragement. Being able to advocate for oneself is necessary as social workers are often the advocate for others. Advocacy can be a collective effort through agencies in order to create a supportive environment. Placing one's well-being as a priority is valuable personally and through the work done within the agency.

Conclusions:

C.A.R.I. is a unique initiative designed for first-generation social work students of color to foster sustainable self-care practices and combat rest inequality. Its overarching goal is to empower these students to prioritize their well-being, which will not only benefit them personally but also enhance their ability to effectively serve their future clients.

Lessons Learned

Throughout the author's time developing C.A.R.I., it became apparent that the self-care routine and process is never-ending. Her own challenges faced throughout the time dedicated to C.A.R.I. ultimately proved that the need to prove yourself through hustle culture is not always worth it. It was an extremely valuable lesson for the writer to learn and be reminded that prioritizing yourself is the beginning of being there for others. Throughout the development of the curriculum, it served as a reminder that self-reflection and changes are a constant part of growth. Self-reflection and taking inventory of one's needs is a lifelong journey that revolves around constant practices and truly begins something that all social workers should be familiar with.

References:

Scan QR code to view references.