On May 20th, 2012 the Humanitarian Assistance Program at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies (JKSIS) partnered with the International Disaster Psychology program at the Graduate School of Professional Psychology (GSPP) to offer students from both programs an opportunity to engage in a one day international humanitarian crisis simulation. The Humanitarian Training Initiative (HTI) was brought in based on their expertise in developing and implementing simulations for academic institutions and humanitarian organizations.

The goal of simulating a complex international humanitarian crisis was to provide students with a unique opportunity to apply skills and knowledge acquired in the classroom to a rapidly changing, complex and stressful international humanitarian emergency. The specific focus was on assessing and addressing the needs of a population newly displaced by conflict. The simulation was meant to serve as a tool in the process of preparing students for work in the humanitarian sector by giving them a taste of on-the-ground realities and allowing them to experience how they function in such environments.

Simulations have been found to be an effective education tool, especially in the health sciences, allowing students to develop necessary skills, and providing critical opportunities for evaluation of competencies, while removing risks associated with actual field work. Simulation experience may also provide a competitive edge in the domestic and international job market. As such, simulations are an essential component of training in international humanitarian work and disaster psychology.

DU Faculty, students, an HTI consultant, and members of the Denver community with international humanitarian experience participated in the simulation. Eight evaluators served as team coaches and assessed student competencies, soft skills (e.g., communication, time management, frustration tolerance) and hard skills (needs assessment, project design, proposal writing, and donor advocacy). Student volunteers and faculty assumed the roles of recent arrivals to a “welcome center” for displaced people, local NGO staff, government officials, and donors.

Students were divided into four teams comprised of generalists (human rights, protection), specialists (psychosocial/mental health), and a team leader. Each of these teams assessed the needs of the newly displaced population and developed a project proposal based on priority needs. The exercise concluded with a “donor meeting” where each of the teams pitched their project, competing for funding in front of a panel of donors. The day concluded with a “debriefing” during which explicit feedback was provided to students.

Feedback focused on specific competencies relevant to humanitarian work including: applying principles of humanitarian aid in the context of protection and mental health interventions; managing yourself in a high pressure environment; producing results; fostering integration and teamwork. Students also had the opportunity to complete a self-assessment tool.
The Humanitarian Assistance Program, which is funded by the Social Science Foundation, and The International Disaster Psychology program shared costs associated with the exercise. Additional funding for this simulation was received through the University of Denver’s Office of Internationalization.

Participant feedback

Participants had the opportunity to provide feedback during the final “debriefing”. The feedback was positive, with students emphasizing the realistic feel and importance of the simulation for preparation for humanitarian work. Constructive criticism included a desire for 1) more preparation time (students received a half day training prior to the simulation), 2) dissemination of examples of successful program proposals, 3) longer simulations, and 4) more opportunities to participate in simulations.

In addition, participants (students and faculty) were invited to provide feedback anonymously through a web-based survey the week following the simulation. Half of the student participants completed the online survey as did 5 out of the 8 faculty evaluators.

The feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive. All survey respondents indicated that they would recommend the simulation to their colleagues, with 80% strongly agreeing that they would do so.

"This was a very beneficial and useful training.” - student

"I... learned that I definitely want to continue in humanitarian work, and would like to find myself in the field someday.” - student

"Students had a good simulation experience and faculty had an opportunity to see how students react in these situations.” - evaluator

Simulated crises allows faculty to better tailor program content to student needs, and provide an opportunity for students to reflect on deficits and competencies.

"I learned about some of my challenges in working on a team, as well as about the benefits of working with a team (like when you are all exhausted). “ - student

"[I learned] that I was surprisingly comfortable doing a needs assessment, and that I may be more interested in doing this type of work than I previously thought” - student

Participants also appreciated the opportunity to be exposed to varied challenges and to apply academic learning in a real world context.

"I most value the experience gained in moving from assessment to program planning to fundraising attempts. It made a lot of nebulous concepts from my program much more concrete” - student

Consistent with feedback received during the “debriefing” the day of the simulation, half of the online survey respondents suggested that a longer (2-3 day) exercise with additional preparation time would enhance the experience.
Next Steps

The one day simulation exercise was developed as a pilot for a longer (2-3 day) simulation exercise planned for Spring 2013. Based on the lessons learned from this exercise, the Humanitarian Assistance Program at JKSIS will work together with the International Disaster Psychology program at GSPP, HTI and other partners to plan and implement this more elaborate simulation. Multi-disciplinary simulations are particularly important as graduates of the two programs will encounter people from various professional backgrounds in the field, and will need to forge multi-sectorial partnerships to ensure coordinated humanitarian response. The longer form simulation will allow for replication of common hardship conditions, including an extended period responding to the challenge of competing tasks demands with limited resources and little sleep.

For more information:

Joseph Korbel Humanitarian Assistance Program at DU:
http://www.du.edu/korbel/academic/graduate_certificate_programs/HA.html

International Disaster Psychology program at DU:
http://www.du.edu/gspp/degree-programs/international-disaster-psychology/overview/index.html

Humanitarian Training Initiative:
http://www.humanitariantraininginitiative.org/

DU Clarion - Simulation Prepares Students for Catastrophes: