

The Ontario Rural Council

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March 20, 2008

Queen's University Course
“Professionals in Rural Practice:
An Interdisciplinary Approach”

Describing the Course

This particular course at Queen's University has been offered each fall since 2005. It brings together faculty and students from Medicine, Nursing, Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Education, Law, and Theology. The course intends to introduce students to rural life and rural culture and to give students a sense of what it would be like to practice their particular profession in a rural area. The course is unique in bringing into one classroom students from so many different faculties.

A. Origin of the Course

1. How Did This Course Come About?

Two Key Events:

- A CBC Radio story in the fall of 2001 about the challenge of small towns and rural communities to find doctors.
- A gathering in the fall of 2002 of Queen's University faculty members from Medicine, Nursing, Rehabilitation Therapy, Education, and Theology, along with some rural practitioners in those same fields, to talk about whether and how we could be supportive of rural initiatives happening in the various faculties.

2. Challenges in Putting the Course Together

Logistical Challenges

a) getting University approval for such a unique course;

b) working out how to deliver the course given the very different schedules of the various faculties at Queen's;

(c) working out how to deliver a course given the very different academic programmes represented in these different fields.

Financial Challenges

3. What We Hoped the Course Would Address

With the conspicuous exception of education, rural communities have had difficulty attracting persons from the professions we represented. When persons practising these professions have moved to rural areas, often they have not stayed for a lengthy portion of their career.

We hoped that the course would help with these recruitment and retention issues.

4. Faculty Expectations in Developing the Course

All of us involved in planning and teaching the course had practised our profession in rural areas prior to going to Queens.

Our own experiences suggested that if students had a better idea of what it was like to live and to work in a rural area, upon graduation they would be more likely to consider going to a rural area. They would also be more likely to stay in a rural area.

B. Developing the Course

1. Goals for the Course

We wanted:

- a) to provide students with a sense of what it would be like to live and work in a rural area;
- b) to help students consider persons working in other professions in rural areas as potential colleagues and friends.

2. Key Details of the Course

(a) We capped enrolment at 35—between 4 and 6 students from each of the seven different faculties involved.

(b) We built a compulsory weekend “rural immersion” into the course. In each year we have offered the course, the students have spent a weekend in Sharbot Lake, a community about a one hour drive north of Kingston. The weekend includes staying overnight and sleeping in the gymnasium in the local high school.

Key Details, continued

(c) The weekend has included a number of different panels composed of local residents, municipal officials and politicians, First Nations persons, etc., who have done presentations on the joys and challenges of life in a rural community in contemporary Ontario.

Key Details, continued

(d) We have made extensive use throughout the course of guest presenters from the various professions, persons who have spent much or all of their careers working in rural areas.

(e) Several assignments during the course require students to work in a team composed of students from the other professions represented in the course.

3. Some of the Topics Covered in the Course

- Living and Working in a Rural Area
- Mentorship
- Professional Boundaries—How do these play out in a rural area
- Living and working with disabilities in a rural area
- Nursing and medicine in a rural area
- The advantages and the challenges of teaching in a rural school
- The law and rural issues
- Rural churches

C. Learning and Results 3 Years Later

1. Student Profile (Who Takes the Course)

- 60-65 % of the students who take the course would self-describe as coming from a rural area or a small town.
- Most of those from large metropolitan areas who take the course do so because they want to get a sense of what it would be like to live and to work in a rural area.

2. Are Students Who Take the Course More Likely to Work in Rural Areas?

While it is too early to know for sure, anonymous surveys administered to the students suggest that approximately 40% are more likely to work in a rural area as a result of having done the course. A little over 50% indicate the likelihood they would work in a rural area has stayed the same. Only 6% have indicated they think it less likely they will work in a rural area following the course.

3. Other Observations

- Students have been universally positive about the course.
- Students have indicated an appreciation at coming to know more about the other professions as a result of doing the course.