



## Looking back, looking forward: New masters-level creative arts therapists reflect on the professional impact of an interprofessional community health internship



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### ABSTRACT

In the Philadelphia area, the Bridging the Gaps Community Health Internship Program (BTG) is a city-wide community health service learning program primarily open to graduate-level students of health professions, including medicine, public health, dental, pharmacy, social work, creative arts therapies, occupational and physical therapy, and law. Interns in the seven-week, paid, summer program work in interprofessional teams four days per week at a community site and spend one day each week in presentations, workshops, and small group discussions. Six creative arts therapists who participated as graduate students in this non-curricular internship during the summers of 2007 and 2008 were interviewed in 2011 to examine their perceptions of the impact of BTG upon their professional identity as new creative arts therapists. The study suggests that the internship cultivated in these participants a foundation for interdisciplinary clinical work that is socially and culturally aware. Shared themes included awareness of social determinants of health, healthcare as a privilege, and differing perspectives in healthcare environments, as well as increased empathy for marginalized and vulnerable populations. The authors recommend interprofessional learning opportunities that foster the development of clinicians who acknowledge their clients' sociocultural differences and systemic interactions.

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### Introduction

Bridging the Gaps (BTG) is a program that links the training of health and social service professionals with the provision of health related service for vulnerable populations. The BTG Community Health Internship Program is established in Philadelphia, Erie, and Pittsburgh and in the Lehigh Valley and New Jersey. In Philadelphia, BTG is a city-wide community health service learning program open to largely graduate-level students of the health and social service professions including medicine, public health, dental, pharmacy, social work, creative arts therapies, occupational and physical therapies, and law. Interns in the seven-week, paid, summer program work in interprofessional teams four days per week at a community site and spend one day each week in presentations, workshops, and small group discussions. Students are also responsible for completing a weekly reflection journal,

systematically logging their weekly activities, and completing a final, summative report about their summer experiences and personal and professional growth.

The authors examined the weekly journals from the 2007 interns of Drexel University, one of the Philadelphia component programs, in order to explore the students' developmental trajectory throughout the summer experience. Based upon themes that emerged during that review, the authors then created a standardized open-ended questionnaire that was used in the current study. Six creative arts therapists who participated as graduate students in this non-curricular internship during the summers of 2007 and 2008 were interviewed in 2011 to examine their perceptions of the impact of BTG upon their professional identity as new creative arts therapists. All participants were asked the same questions, although prompts were used to encourage further exploration of the topic by the participant. The interviews were transcribed and coded using issue-focused analysis (Weiss, 1994) to examine themes, both broad and specific, as indicated by the participants' reflections on their summer experience.

The study suggested that these internships cultivated in the participants a foundation for interprofessional clinical work that was socially and culturally aware. Shared themes included an

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awareness of social determinants of health, healthcare as a privilege, differing perspectives in healthcare environments, and an increased empathy for marginalized and vulnerable populations. The authors recommend interprofessional learning opportunities that foster the development of clinicians who acknowledge their clients' sociocultural differences and systemic interactions. Guided service-related experiences can supplement curricular experiential learning through the modeling of civic engagement and exposure to the effects of the socioeconomic environment on the health of the individual.

### **Bridging the Gaps Program description**

In Philadelphia, the Bridging the Gaps Community Health Internship Program (BTG) is made up of five component programs housed at each of the city's academic health centers: Drexel University, Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, Temple University, Thomas Jefferson Medical College, and University of Pennsylvania. BTG, open primarily to graduate-level students of health/social service professions as offered by each academic health center/university, is committed to "providing meaningful service while training community-responsive health and social service professionals" (*Bridging the Gaps, 2013*). BTG was established in 1991 in Philadelphia, and has since expanded to include Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine, the University of Pittsburgh, the Lehigh Valley Health Network/DeSales University, and Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey (formerly, The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey). Since its inception, BTG has trained over 4000 health/social service professions students on issues related to health disparities, interdisciplinary collaboration, health care access, the broad definition of health, and the imperative of advocacy in health care. At Drexel University, BTG has been open to students from the College of Medicine, School of Public Health, School of Law, and the Department of Creative Arts Therapies. The Creative Arts in Therapy Master's Program at Drexel University includes the professional modalities of art therapy, dance/movement therapy and music therapy.

The Department of Creative Arts Therapies at Drexel University resides within the College of Nursing and Health Professions, encouraging a professional identity as healthcare provider. The National Coalition of Creative Arts Therapies Associations (NCCATA) states that creative arts therapists are "human service professionals who use arts modalities and creative processes for the purpose of ameliorating disability and illness and optimizing health and wellness" ([www.nccata.org](http://www.nccata.org)). The American Dance Therapy Association and American Music Therapy Association identify target areas of their modalities as physical, emotional, cognitive and social (*American Dance Therapy Association, n.d.*; *American Music Therapy Association, 2013b*, para 2). The Art Therapy Credentials Board uses terms including developmental, medical, educational, and social or psychological when describing target areas (*Art Therapy Credentials Board, n.d.*, para 1). Using a "psychotherapeutic intervention" (ADTA), creative arts therapists identify as "human service" professionals (ATCB), working within an "established health profession (AMTA)."

Within the curriculum of Drexel's Creative Arts in Therapy Master's Program, BTG is positioned just before the clinical internship of the second year. Students are advised that BTG is not a clinical program, as there is no clinical supervision; however, many of the students use their specific art forms in the community settings, which may include inner-city day camps, homeless or domestic violence shelters, older adult programs and community health centers. The participants in this study worked at a variety of sites with children and youth, including a summer camp for children living

in homeless shelters, a youth shelter for older teens, two different homeless shelters for women and children, and a program geared toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth.

Given that service learning experiences are frequently not realistic for students within the busy curricula of creative arts therapy degree programs, and the fact that little has been published about the role of service learning in creative arts therapy education, the authors sought to examine the impact of this experience on the professional identity of new creative arts therapy professionals who participated in the program in the middle of their graduate education.

### **Service learning and health professions education**

Service learning offers profound experiences to students of all health professions, as the emphasis is on addressing community needs and social issues (*Gelmon, Holland, Shinnamon, & Morris, 1998*) and is a topic of interest in current health professions education literature (*Borges & Hartung, 2007; Brush, Markert, & Lazarus, 2006; Elam et al., 2003; Hunt & Swiggem, 2007; Peterson, Yockey, Larsen, Twidwell, & Jorgensen, 2006; Hunt, 2007; Eckenfels, 2009*). Through experiential education formats, service learning promotes student development through a reciprocal relationship with human and community needs (*Jacoby, 2003*). *Clark (1999)* stated that "additional elements of service learning include fostering of civic and social responsibility and of caring for others by the student" (p. 646). *Davidson (2002)* described a Community Health Scholars Program at the University of Florida, stating that a goal of such an experience is twofold in that it should meet the needs of the community while exposing students to community practice and environment. Another goal of the University of Florida project, as well as the Rochester Experience (*Andrus & Bennett, 2006*), was to provide an opportunity for students to work in interdisciplinary health teams, the former involving medical and pharmacy students and the latter involving medical, public health, and nursing students. *Hunt and Swiggem (2007)* described transcultural experiences of nursing students involved in a service learning project with families who are homeless, wherein students may "place their role as health professionals in a broader context as they refine citizenship skills to achieve social change" (p. 168). They added,

Crossing the bridge to otherness by developing a relationship with the 'other' allows for the recognition of similarity. This is where the transformation takes place, resulting in an appreciation for the newly acquired skills that enhance their capacity to provide therapeutic nursing care (p. 173).

Some music therapy academic programs encourage community service and offer international service learning opportunities for their students. The AMTA Code of Ethics also emphasizes responsibility to the community, as in Standard 2.3.1:

The MT respects the social and moral expectations of the community in which he/she works. The MT is aware that standards of behavior are a personal matter as they are for other citizens, except as they may concern the fulfillment of professional duties or influence the public attitude and trust towards the profession (<http://www.musictherapy.org/about/ethics/>).

Other modalities also encourage community service:

Art therapists are encouraged, whenever possible, to recognize a responsibility to participate in activities that contribute to a better community and society, including devoting a portion of their professional activity to services for which there is little or no financial return (<http://www.atcb.org/home/code>, 1.5.6).

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