

DESCRIPTION OF SOUTHERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY'S MSW CO-OCCURRING DISORDERS (COD) COHORT PROGRAM

Jaak Rakfeldt, Ph.D., LCSW

In Washington, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has designated co-occurring substance abuse and mental disorders as a significant policy and practice initiative. This approach was prompted by the fact that co-occurring disorders are far more common than most professionals or the public had previously realized. SAMHSA estimates that 50-75 percent of substance abuse treatment programs patients also have a co-occurring mental illness, while 20-50 percent of those treated in mental health settings have co-occurring substance abuse. Most people with co-occurring disorders have not received appropriate treatment for both mental disorders and substance abuse. Many have received no treatment of any kind.

Likewise, the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) has taken significant and essential steps to increase its capacity to provide accessible, effective, comprehensive, integrated, and evidence-based services for adults with co-occurring disorders (CODs). One facet of this DMHAS initiative has been to cooperate with Southern to reformat a portion of its MSW program to meet better the need to have trained professionals who are well equipped to work with persons who have co-occurring disorders. As a result of this collaboration, the Social Work Department initiated an innovative hybrid model educational program, primarily intended for persons already employed in the mental health and addictions field or for those wishing to work in this field, by making it more possible for such persons to develop the evidence-based skill sets to work with the COD client population. The innovative reformatting involved converting the existing mental and substance use curriculum into perhaps the first hybrid or blended educational model at this university. Moreover, research suggests that hybrid, blended models lead to better learning outcomes than traditional in-person classes or all online modes of instruction.

The goal was to allow bachelor-level workers the opportunity to complete their master's degrees while maintaining their employment. The program focused on and developed an adult learning environment that enriches the educational process, focusing on integrated dual disorders treatment. The format is an intensive cohort model, which typically meets for three days each month for three years, including summers. There is a marked emphasis on an adult learning paradigm in which the other students are a vital classroom resource, and a strong learning community is created. In addition, self-discipline is a crucial skill for success in this type of program.

This program consists of the following elements:

- The syllabus, readings, and assignments for each course are provided to the students two to three weeks before the start of each class. This practice allows students to prepare adequately, which includes readings and a written assignment, that are focused on the material to be discussed in classes.

- Courses meet for at least three days (typically Friday, Saturday & Sunday) each month. A final assignment is usually due two to three weeks following the last class session. Students interact with each other and with the instructor between classes using the "Threaded Discussion piece of the *Blackboard* platform. In addition, students submit course assignments and continue to pursue course asynchronous online work between class sessions using *Blackboard* and participating in synchronous remote learning activities using ZOOM.
- Students earn supervised field education credits at mental health and substance abuse agencies, primarily at DMHAS or DMHAS contract agencies. Students engage in learning opportunities distinctly separate from their everyday job responsibilities. Field education is tightly integrated into their classroom curriculum. Students are involved in field education during almost their entire educational experience, spreading the number of field placement hours while maintaining the required 1,100 hours total.

The admissions criteria for the COD Cohort Program are the same as for traditional students and are as follows:

1. Applicants must meet all SCSU Graduate School and MSW Program Admissions requirements. The admissions procedures are the same as for traditional students.
2. Applicants must be interested in working with clients who have co-occurring disorders of mental health and substance abuse issues. Interest in working with COD clients is demonstrated by having worked in mental health and substance abuse/addictions or having a sincere interest in pursuing a career in this area post-MSW.
3. Qualified applicants from the Department of Mental Health and Addictions Services (DMHAS) or any of its contract agencies (private non-profits) from around the state are highly encouraged to apply. DMHAS and its contract agencies have pledged to help facilitate employee/student progress through this COD Cohort Program by providing flexible time off to attend classes (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday at least once a month) and complete field placements.

COD students' reflections regarding their experience of the Cohort Program:

"My experience of our COD Cohort program has been wonderful. I couldn't have developed a better-suited program that meets my needs as a LADC looking to get an MSW in the field of co-occurring disorders. The way the class dates were set up somehow fit perfectly into my extremely busy schedule. Being with the same Cohort of people made the process comfortable, enjoyable and supportive. My aspirations for the future include starting a private practice. This program has given me the opportunity to advance my education while I continue to work full time and meet obligations to my family, friends and community." DG - 11/28/10

"The past three years has been quite the experience. Although challenging at times, it was a very rewarding time. Over the three years, classmates have turned into family, people I can go to for support who truly know what I'm going through. For me, the most exciting part of this program was to watch my learning "in vivo" to see the diagnoses, the theories, what the professors were teaching me come to realization or life while at my placement and place of employment. Having the learning and implementation go hand in hand enriched my experience

and helped me better understand my education. My MSW experience through the Cohort helped me mature, taught me to make time for fun, and develop into a clinical social worker ready to enter the field. The program really has a guiding light from Dr. Rakfeldt. His enthusiasm and dedication to the Cohort kept us pressing forward. His love of teaching and seeing his students succeed was inspirational and motivating." KM - 11/24/10

DR. JAAK RAKFELDT, COORDINATOR OF THE CO-OCCURRING DISORDERS (COD) COHORT PROGRAM

The Cohort Program Coordinator is professor Dr. Jaak Rakfeldt. He teaches in the masters and doctoral programs at Southern. He teaches such courses as Research Methods, Psychopathology, Advanced Clinical Practice in Community Mental Health/Substance Abuse Courses, and Research Practicum Seminars. Dr. Rakfeldt was the recipient of Southern's *J. Philip Smith Outstanding Teacher Award* in 2006. In 2019, he received the National Association of Social Workers/Connecticut Chapter *Educator of the Year Award*. He is also an Assistant Clinical Professor at the Yale University School of Medicine Department of Psychiatry. He does clinical supervision, conducts seminars, and provides clinical instruction and supervision to Third-year Residents at the Yale University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry. Dr. Rakfeldt also serves as a clinical consultant and conducts seminars and colloquia at various community mental health agencies. Dr. Rakfeldt has over fifty publications, primarily dealing with mental health and addictions issues in journals such as *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, *the British Journal of Psychiatry*, *Archives of Clinical Neuropsychology*, *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience*, *Psychiatry*, *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, *Yale Psychiatry*, *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *Psychiatric Services*, *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, *Journal of Community Psychology*, *the American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation*, *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, and *Best Practices in Mental Health: An International Journal*. In addition, Dr. Rakfeldt has presented at over one hundred regional, national, and international conferences, primarily in mental health and substance abuse. He co-authored a book titled: *The Roots of the Recovery Movement in Psychiatry: Lessons Learned* (2010) John Wiley & Sons, London, UK. He also maintains a private practice www.drjaakrakfeldt.com.

For more information on the MSW Cohort Program, please contact Dr. Jaak Rakfeldt at 203-392-6565 or rakfeldtj1@southernct.edu

