

# Human Services Academy: A Career Pathway Model for Youth in Mental Health

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Today's workforce demands are substantially different from those of four decades ago, when a high school diploma was enough to succeed. Current labor force demands, as well as the need to prepare for the "21st century workforce," emphasize more formal education and technical training. The harsh reality is that our youth are not adequately prepared with the high-level skills, both in academic instruction and technical training, necessary for them to be successful. Today students face the same set of expectations from employers as

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they do from colleges and universities. For example, both employers and post-secondary institutions want people who possess strong reading, writing, math and communication skills, along with diverse technical skills relevant to the real-world job market. These patterns are evident not only in technical career tracks, but in social service and mental health areas as well, where significant shortages of qualified personnel exist.

Human services and mental health agencies are central community supports for low-income families who rely on the public sector or nonprofit organizations for services. The well-being of these individuals is being compromised by the shortage of bilingual and bicultural

human service/mental health workers, a problem compounded by changing community conditions and public policies. The Human Services Academy (HSA) model is a potential training mechanism for educating young people and guiding them toward a career pathway in human services or mental health.

The HSA is a career academy model that can best be characterized as a school-within-a-school with a specific career focus. It aims to create a supportive and personalized learning environment for at-risk students. The final goals are to capture students' interest in learning, cultivate an awareness of a worthwhile career in mental health/human services and create a college-bound scholar. Over the past 10 years, the HSA model has had great success in motivating students, increasing student academic achievement and inspiring students to attend college. Since the program began in February 1998, a total of 724 students have had work-based learning jobs in the community, gaining "hands on" experience with the guidance of a worksite mentor. In the 10 years of the program's existence combined, students have provided a total 105,365 hours of work and service, which is the equivalent of 53 full-time human services employees.



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By design, the HSA model has evolved into a workforce collaborative of mental health and education partners who are building a conduit to careers in mental health. This collaborative connects high school career academies, a community college certificated program and university-level options that offer multiple entry points to educational/experiential learning, with exit points to community-based mental health jobs.

In order to create and sustain a competent mental health workforce pipeline, more needs to be done to impact academic and training programs at the post-secondary level. Strong regional partnerships between the mental health field and secondary and post-secondary institutions are the cornerstone of these efforts. For more information visit [www.mhala.org/human-services-academy.htm](http://www.mhala.org/human-services-academy.htm).