



Developing a Graduate Mental Health Internship Program with Sophia Loubeau

Claire:

Hello, and welcome to In Session, a podcast where we speak with change makers working towards safe, supportive learning environments within their communities. Our guests include state and local education agencies and their partners, all grant recipients from the Department of Education, using their funding to advance school-based mental health services, support mental health service professionals, and establish trauma recovery and prevention programs. I'm Claire. And this is Annie at the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. And we produce In Session.

Claire:

On this week's episode, we speak with Sophia Loubeau, licensed clinical social worker and clinical grant facilitator from Broward County Public Schools in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a recipient of the U.S. Department of Education's Mental Health School Professionals Grant. Sophia joins us to talk about the collaborative Internship For All program, an initiative at Broward County Public Schools to help expand the pipeline of high quality trained providers to address the shortage of mental health service professionals in schools.

Annie:

Welcome, Sophia. We're so happy to have you on the podcast today. To get us started, we would love to just hear a little bit of background information about yourself, about what led you to the work you're doing, your program, anything else that you'd like to share before we get into the questions.

Sophia Loubeau:

Sure. Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here. A little bit about myself. My name is Sophia Loubeau. I have been employed with Broward County Public Schools for the last 20 years, primarily in the capacity of school social worker, and now clinical grant facilitator. I am humbly the proud daughter of patient immigrant parents. So I always like to give them their flowers because, without them, my journey would not have been as exciting and as rewarding.

Sophia Loubeau:

I am the local grant facilitator for the Collaborative Internship For All program, which is an internship program based in Broward County Public Schools that was primarily designed to increase the pipeline of mental health services to our students, employees, and staff. Because of the traumatic and the horrific

incidents surrounding the Marjory Stoneman Douglas, the district experienced a lot of primary and secondary trauma as it relates to incidents surrounding that. Coupled with the ongoing trauma of just students and families who are residing in communities that may be resource-deprived, high crime, poverty, and just experience their own familial trauma as it relates to that, so then was the birth of the Collaborative Internship For All program?

Claire:

I would love to dive deeper into the Collaborative Internships For All program. How did you get that off the ground in response to the trauma from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas events, and what specific community needs were you trying to meet and have continued to meet with the program?

Sophia Loubeau:

First, I want to say that the school district, Broward County Public Schools had an existing traditional program for internship for students majoring in social work. So that program then pretty much laid down the foundation of legwork for the birth of the Collaborative Internship program. How those two programs differ is the Collaborative Internship program is a specialized program where the internship requires more hours than the traditional universities that may require 600, that may require more or less. We require 740. And so what that means is that the intern will remain with us for the duration of the school year, so from August until June. So that means even after they graduate, I give them their whole senioritis moment, but then they already know that you're with us until June.

Sophia Loubeau:

And we really appreciate their commitment to that because that is something that is mentioned to them up front. So then wanting to commit to that is just equally as exciting because it shows that they're vested in where they are and the work that they are doing.

Sophia Loubeau:

We really wanted to be able to bring back interns who were students at one point with Broward County Public Schools, because they're coming in through a different lens, being able to understand what it was like to be in the capacity of a student and now of a high school student and now in the role of a graduate student. Things that they've experienced, things that they would've liked to have been exposed to, whether that's mentors, whether that's direction, as it relates to social emotional support, understanding their own personal dynamics, communication. So we really wanted to tap into that. And the interns are a great way to be able to see through a different lens. Because sometimes as seasoned social workers, as veteran social workers, we may have tunnel vision on something because we're constantly inundated or overexposed to that.

Sophia Loubeau:

But if someone else coming in then has a different facet of that same view, or may have a different lens, or may have just something that they can bring to the table that will provide the same solution, but in a different way, we always welcome innovative and new ways to be able to do that.

Annie:

Thank you. Yeah. I mean, it sounds like a great program. So to kind of go off of that, we'd love to hear more about what some of the successes of the program have been. So not just in terms of individual interns, but in general, what successes have you seen, or what impact have you seen on the community, the county, anything of that sort?

Sophia Loubeau:

So the successes of the program have overall been great. First and foremost, we really let the interns know that we value the support that they're providing as it relates to the mental health support of the staff, of the families, of the community, of the students. And we get a lot of great feedback, whether it is from my colleagues, as it relates to what the interns are exposed to in training, in district initiatives, in community initiatives.

Sophia Loubeau:

What we do is that we want to make sure that we are enmeshing the graduate students in this community. We have district initiatives such as the Harvest Drive, where we're providing food and resources to families during the Thanksgiving holiday, where we have a tour drive. Some of even the local schools may have their own drive, and then the students are participating. We have where they lead groups, and it's just take your wings and fly and observing them from where they started and to where they finished.

Sophia Loubeau:

There's just a change in language. There's a change in how they view the work that they are doing. There is more self-assertion. There is self-confidence. There is just a growth all around that they themselves recognized once they are exited the program. And it's nothing but humbling because without their vision, without them putting in the work, without the whole grassroots concept, the program wouldn't be as successful.

Sophia Loubeau:

We have students who have then graduated. With this most recent graduation, we have a graduate who is in Spain right now working with geriatric population with dementia and Alzheimer's. We have another student who was in Africa participating in a social reform agenda. So we have students who are all over the place, just making their mark with what they have learned throughout the program. And the feedback has always been the same, we're going into our third cohort, is that they value the experience that they received through the internship because we're not just, they get a lot of training. That's one thing they will say is that they get the training.

Sophia Loubeau:

And so I know specifically with one intern who graduated two years ago, she came back, and she thanked me because the training that she participated and completed in that internship, when she went to her new job, she, one, did not have to complete them, and two, it fast-tracked her into positions that she didn't think that she would even qualify for.

Claire:

That's awesome. And it sounds like you have such great both training programs, but also relationships with the interns. And I'd love to talk a little bit more about that. I know you mentioned before that some of your interns went to high school themselves and now are working with you. So I'd just love to hear a

little bit more about how building those relationships and starting those relationships early as well, kind of has acted as an asset to your community, and then generally how you continue to build relationships from the ground up as well.

Sophia Loubeau:

So the building of the relationship, for me, is pretty simple. It's understanding where each individual is and where they want to go. So everybody is coming in with an experience, and whatever that experience is, it has taken you to this road to where you want to major in social work or where you want to major in clinical mental health counseling. Whatever that is, this is the road that you've come to. So I think it's important to understand what that road is because that is going to navigate and dictate then how then do you connect with the students, with the families, with the colleagues and whoever it is that you are working with?

Sophia Loubeau:

So I find it extremely important to not only have group supervision with the interns, but also individual supervision, because then that platform allows for myself and that intern to have more of not just a one-on-one conversation, but to really delve into the whole logistics of what does it look like being an intern and then having them to navigate to becoming a mental health professional.

Sophia Loubeau:

What does that look like when you're learning in the classroom about therapeutic modalities, when you're looking at human environment, when you're learning about those concepts? What does that look like when now you're applying that in real life with students in a school or whatever setting that you are in? What does that transition look like? Where do you feel that you are strongest? Where do you feel that you are most challenged? Where do you feel that you want to grow from?

Sophia Loubeau:

So what I found is that, in asking those questions, there is an authenticity in that relationship and where these students truly want to learn more. They truly want to grow more from that space. And then they really, really, really give their all as it relates to saturating everything that they can. And this spills over into the students. In observing them, just the relationship between them and the students is always one of I'm coming to you just because I know you're here to listen. Even if I don't have anything to say, but because I know that you are here, I know that you are coming here to listen. And that is the ultimate goal of that. Especially where our kids are today, as it relates to what they're being influenced by, it really is important that they have a sounding board, and that with that, they're able to understand what that thought process is, what is normalized behavior, what is something that they may need to seek additional assistance with? So all of those things are important.

Annie:

Yeah. That's fantastic. I want to touch a little bit on, obviously, you've partnered with an Institute of Higher Education to make contact with these graduate students, right, as you said.

Sophia Loubeau:

Yes.

Annie:

Could you maybe touch on that a little bit, how that partnership came about with this Institute of Higher Education, maybe strategies that you had in order to make that connection to maintain that partnership as well?

Sophia Loubeau:

So when the grant was being developed, there was already a partnership with one of the Institute of Higher Education through our traditional internship program that had already been established. So from there, the committee that was part of creating the grant, then extended that to other Institutes of Higher Education in which where they might have had collaboration with the district in other capacities. So with that coming in is how we were able to establish the relationship with the Institutes of Higher Education.

Sophia Loubeau:

Now to maintain it was the work in itself because it's a new program. So as a new program coming in, there was not really a lot of information as it relates to the logistics and the process of the program. So one of the challenges was to be able to have these partnering universities understand what the program identified and what the program was requesting and also what they required of me as it related to making sure that the students learning was also being met, and for me, what the program requirements were also being met, as it relates to logistics, numbers and just maintaining a checks and balances of that part was challenging. And also establishing new partnerships with other Institutes of Higher Education and just the whole logistics behind that. Once an Institute of Higher Education is interested in partnering, then what is the procedure then? You go through legal. You have to establish affiliation. Then it's just a process of just making the paperwork move and then just waiting on that.

Claire:

Yeah, definitely. And it sounds like it can be a complicated process at times, for sure, but well worthwhile when you eventually get the great interns. I'd love to hear more about challenges you've encountered more broadly and in program implementation and in working with the interns as well and anything you've done to address those challenges.

Sophia Loubeau:

So one of the challenges that the program incurred was at the launch of the program is when COVID happened. So because of that, the district at that time had moved into where the platform was going to be 100% virtual. So this presented a challenge where this is a new program. This is its first launch. The platform is going to be 100% virtual. I have these interns coming in, how is it that they're still going to get what they need, even though they may be on the virtual platform? So that was a challenge in itself.

Sophia Loubeau:

The other challenge was with them being on the virtual platform, how is it that the program would be able to build a relationship so that these Institute of Higher Education that have invested in the program, these students that are now in the program, making sure that their needs were met without feeling that they did not get what they needed. So the quality of service was extremely important, and that was a challenge to meet in itself.

Sophia Loubeau:

So a lot of it was me leaning on colleagues who have had experience as it relates to teaching and instructing on a virtual platform. My immediate supervisors and supervisors navigating what that is going to look like on a virtual platform, providing different types of creative experiences, whether it is connecting with students through what we have called teams, which is Zoom and connecting with students that way, the interns, connecting with students that way, because that was another way of communication. There was a capacity to build groups around that meeting on those platforms, as well as providing brief mental health support on those platforms.

Sophia Loubeau:

So that definitely was a challenging year, and it was not just me ensuring that the students were meeting those learning gains, meeting those objectives, but also ensuring that when there was a crisis, or when there was a family in need or when there was a need for the school, how then are we going to make sure to meet that while also maintaining the safety protocols and those guidelines?

Annie:

Absolutely. As soon as you said it took off during COVID, I was like, oh goodness. All those challenges that obviously, we didn't know, we would have to address at the time. Okay. So going from there, I think since a lot of other grantees will be listening to this podcast and taking a lot away from it, if you could give other grantees some advice or specific strategies that you found really helpful that you used in developing or maintaining this program. What would you say to them if they're interested in taking a stab at developing a program like this, or even looking into what their options are? What would you say to them?

Sophia Loubeau:

The first thing is look at what the need is, and depending on what that need is, how many other institutions or other agencies that are out there that are meeting that need, because what you don't want to do is oversaturate it. So if it is that you can provide that same support, but in a different avenue, then I would say explore that.

Sophia Loubeau:

The other thing is with your relationships, for me, as it was with the Institutes of Higher Education, it was important for me to be able to meet with those who were the decision makers and having meetings, whether that was in person or whether that was on Zoom and making sure that it was not just one time. Trinkets, some goodie bags or some takeaways or something, something where they will remember you by, and it was not just a fleeting conversation.

Sophia Loubeau:

The other thing was your nerves will always be bad because this is going to be something new. For me, I didn't have necessarily anything to measure that by. And what I found out was instead of ruminating on my losses, focusing more on the wins, made me more optimistic as to how then the success of the program was going to be.

Sophia Loubeau:

The other thing was leaning on colleagues, even though they may not be in the same setting that you are in, but the experience is still the same, whether it's frustration, whether it's anxiety, whether it's nerves, whether it's doubt, leaning in on colleagues to be able to be a listening ear, providing some

support, delegating some things, were also a great way to be able to experience the true richness of the program.

Sophia Loubeau:

And lastly, self care. You have to be able to take a break, walk away from the laptop, take a break from the reading, the incessant reading, just doing something where you're disconnecting before having to reconnect, because it can be a lot, and not just workwise, but also in our personal lives where we have other demands that we have to meet as well.

Claire:

And I feel like those are all really wonderful points. And what I heard that stuck out to me most was when you were talking about consistency in the program and then making sure that you're not oversaturating and finding the niche of what is going to be the most useful within your goals, and disconnecting to reconnect as well, I think were all really great points that I jotted down here. I'm kind of curious, I guess, where you go from here, so in terms of either sustainability of the program, if it's going to expand, if you see it going in a certain direction, or if it's going to be continuing on this great path that it's on, what do you think is the most vital to keep it moving?

Sophia Loubeau:

So from here, I would definitely say sustainability of the program and being able to have the previous cohorts come back in and speaking to the next cohort coming in. I think that's just a great way to be able to give a perspective from the lens of an intern as it relates to what the program entails and what it's all about. So definitely sustainability.

Sophia Loubeau:

And being more prevalent as it relates to the needs of mental health, so not just within the school system, but within the communities, because even though the school is the community, but also being in some of these homes where they may not get the emails, where they may not get the phone calls, where the families are too busy to come to the school or to get the messages or the notices. But just knowing that we have the ability to be able to communicate outside of the school through this program is also something that we definitely want to be able to achieve and maintain.

Annie:

Great. Great. Thank you so much for being here today, Sophia. We really appreciate you taking the time out of what I'm sure is a very, very busy schedule to talk to us about this program. And just in the interest of time and in closing, want to give you a space to add a takeaway or a closing thought. What do you want listeners to take away from your episode of In Session before we wrap up today's recording?

Sophia Loubeau:

For me, the takeaway would be to treat each step back and each step forward as a learning experience. We're all going to constantly evolve. And I think allowing yourself the flexibility to be wrong and make it right or have a moment and then gather ourselves back together. I always say, allow myself grace and mercy. Just to be able to do that allows you to feel as if you don't have to have a cape on all the time. It's really hard not to feel that you need to be in all places at all times because it involves you.

Sophia Loubeau:

But I think requiring that you have to give yourself space and time to be able to devote to what is required of you is extremely important. Whether that's setting a calendar for a focus time where you may become engrossed in something, but you still need to take that break. Once that reminder comes on, you have to follow through with it. It's easy to turn it off, but it's harder to turn it off and then walk away and then have to come back. So I think we just need reminders as to just take those breaks. They're really important.

Claire:

Yeah. And I think those are all really great points that can be applied to any program and really anyone in the education sphere of taking everything, the challenges and different decision points as a learning opportunity at base level and kind of taking some of the pressure off and knowing that you're doing great work. It sounds like you have such a great mindset. And I know I learned a lot. I think Annie did as well. And yeah, we just thank you so so much for being here today.

Sophia Loubeau:

I thank you for the opportunity to be here.

Annie:

Thank you. Sophia.

Sophia Loubeau:

Bye.

Claire:

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Claire:

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