Abstract for Paper in Response to the UML CITA Request for Paper Submissions

Submitted by: Dr. Eduardo Siqueira, Dr. Craig Slatin, and Dr. Michael O’Sullivan (conveners)

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Health Disparities Among Healthcare Workers: The Political Economy of a Regional Hospital

A UML research project is studying the ways in which the political economy of the healthcare industry establishes the basis for whether or not occupational injury disparities exist among the workforce of specific healthcare provider organizations. One aspect of this study is extensive case study research of healthcare provider organizations (HPOs) within three healthcare settings: hospitals, nursing homes, and home healthcare. These HPOs are all located in the Merrimack Valley region of Massachusetts.

The healthcare industry in the United States and in Massachusetts has gone through profound restructuring within the last two decades. Increased emphasis upon competitiveness and privatization of public facilities, as well as restructuring of both public and private benefit programs for the employed and unemployed workforce, has altered the way in which healthcare is paid for and delivered to individuals and communities. General demographic changes in the population, particularly an increasing elderly population, has compounded the effects of this restructuring upon the delivery of healthcare.

These changes have had specific affects upon the operations of non-profit hospitals in Massachusetts. They have had to restructure their work environments and their organizational capabilities in order to survive financially. Consequently, hospital managers have chosen to de-skill the healthcare professional workforce and expand the provision of care by non-and-semi-professional healthcare workers. This pattern of workforce reorganization parallels many changes made through quality management programs implemented in other industrial sectors and settings.

This paper will present discussion of one case study of a non-profit hospital. We present a summary of the hospital’s history and describe its major characteristics. Further, we will discuss the contribution of the hospital to the Merrimack Valley regional economy as an employer and provider of essential health care service, and the relationships between the race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic position of its workforce and the labor market of the region. Analysis is presented of the distribution, rates, and severity of workplace injuries within the workforce, focusing in particular on how these injury and illness indicators differ according to the social economic position of employees. Finally, the article places the challenges faced by hospital management and employees regarding hospital policies and practices within the larger debate held in the region about how to foster sustainable regional development in the Merrimack Valley.

This paper addresses the following topic areas listed on the CITA Request for Papers:

- Health and Its Many Links to Sustainability
• Universities Supporting Public Health and a Healthy Economy
• The Implications of Diversity for Supporting Public Health and a Healthy Society