

The 2001 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards: The Value of Research Revisited

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Abstract: *Although doctoral programs in social work are not accredited by the Council on Social Work Education nor subject to the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS, 2001), DSW and Ph.D. programs are affected by the nature and quality of baccalaureate and masters' social work education. In this article, the authors discuss the implications of the 2001 EPAS as they relate to BSW and MSW graduates' motivation and preparation for doctoral education.*

Keywords: *Doctoral education, social work, EPAS, educational policies, accreditation standards*

Doctoral programs in social work are not accredited by the Council on Social Work Education nor subject to the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2001a). Nonetheless, DSW and Ph.D. programs are affected by the nature of baccalaureate and masters' social work education, and thus, by the policies and standards that guide the preparation of students for professional practice. We offer our views about the implications of the 2001 EPAS as they relate to BSW and MSW graduates' motivation and preparation for doctoral education.

Doctoral education in social work is of relatively recent origin. For most of the 20th century, the masters' degree in social work was the terminal degree and, at least implicitly, the most significant graduate level of preparation. The profession's growth in size and popularity, and the increasing importance of social work education within institutions of higher learning, led to a heightened demand for social workers with doctoral degrees. Indeed, the number of social work educational programs has expanded exponentially over the course of the last several decades. However, social work education still does not produce enough social workers to keep up with demand (Austin, 1992, 1997, 1999). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2001), the number of employed social workers educated at the BSW, MSW, or doctoral levels will rise from 604,000 in 1998 to approximately 822,000 by 2008. The number of employed social workers is projected to increase 36.1% during the 10-year period (1998-2008) and the number of social work job openings over that time period is expected to be 296,000 (Braddock, 1999, p. 58).

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The more than 610 accredited BSW or MSW educational programs in the United States produced approximately 28,000 BSW and MSW graduates during 1999 (CSWE, 2001b; 2001c). Despite the large number of graduates, the demand for social workers will continue to exceed supply—especially in rural areas.

Social workers qualified to fill university faculty positions are among the greatest in demand. Doctoral level social workers are also highly sought for their roles in social and behavioral science research centers and institutes. In an effort to meet these needs, the number of programs offering social work doctoral degrees has grown dramatically during the last several decades. There are now approximately 66 colleges or universities in the United States, six in Canada, and one in Israel offering DSW or Ph.D. degrees in social work. At least five more are in the process of developing programs (Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education [GADE], 2001). However, the annual number of professionals graduating with a social work doctorate remains in the range of 250 to 300—as it has for the past several years. Furthermore, approximately one-third to one-half of those doctoral graduates tend to choose positions outside academia (Khinduka, 2001). As a result, the current supply of doctoral graduates in social work remains woefully short of current and projected demands in research and education.

WHY SO FEW?

As faculty members in a large school of social work, we recognize the advantages and rewards associated with our social work doctoral degrees. Certainly, the life of a professor in contemporary academic settings is challenging and stressful. Nonetheless, social work professors with doctorates are highly sought and usually quite well paid—at least when compared to their colleagues in the liberal arts. Unlike social work, several disciplines have a surplus of Ph.D. graduates, resulting in fierce competition for academic and research positions.

We consider ourselves fortunate indeed to be able to serve as professors and researchers in the challenging and evolving world of social work. As a result, we question why relatively few graduates pursue doctoral education and aspire to careers in research or higher education. The demand for social work educators and researchers is so great that something must serve to lessen the attraction of doctoral study for BSW and MSW professionals. Indeed, we wonder whether social work accreditation standards and policies, and the nature of baccalaureate and masters' level social work educational programs, may inadvertently discourage graduates from pursuing doctoral studies.

As professors of the “baby boom” generation retire in substantial numbers, we anticipate a difficult situation in which the need for doctoral-level social work educators and researchers grows extremely quickly, further increasing the gap between supply and demand. We certainly cannot overstate the value of experienced MSW-level faculty who are able to contribute their practice wisdom to students. However, in many university settings, programs need doctoral-level faculty to compete successfully with the increasing number of alternate educational programs (e.g., baccalaureate and masters' programs in human services, mental

health counseling, marriage and family therapy, counseling psychology, substance abuse treatment). Social work programs without a substantial number of doctoral-level faculty who have an active research agenda that yields external funding and contributes to a national reputation, are simply less valued on many university campuses.

ACCREDITATION POLICIES AND STANDARDS

We view several passages in the 2001 EPAS with favor and hope that their implementation improves the quality of BSW and MSW social work education; increases students' familiarity with, interest in, and use of service-related research; and enhances the effectiveness of graduates' service to clients (Gambrill, 2001a). In general, however, the document does not seem to acknowledge the need to encourage and adequately prepare BSW and MSW students to pursue social work doctorates for careers in research or higher education.

Favorable Signs

The Preamble of the EPAS includes a passage that reads:

Social work education combines scientific inquiry with the teaching of professional skills to provide effective and ethical social work services. Social work educators reflect their identification with the profession through their teaching, scholarship, and service. Social work education, from baccalaureate to doctoral levels, employs educational, practice, scholarly, inter-professional, and service delivery models to orient and shape the profession's future in the context of expanding knowledge, changing technologies, and complex human and social concerns. (CSWE, 2001a, p. 3)

The clear recognition that social work education includes "scientific inquiry" is encouraging. We interpret this passage to suggest that social work professors are expected to engage in scientific research activities as a natural part of their roles and functions. The Preamble also suggests that BSW and MSW programs may "use time-tested and new models of program design, implementation, and evaluation. It does so by balancing requirements that promote comparability across programs with a level of flexibility that encourages programs to respond to changing human, professional, and institutional needs" (CSWE, 2001a, p. 3). This passage appears to encourage, at least implicitly, change toward more contemporary and perhaps more effective approaches to teaching and learning. The emphasis upon assessment of the "results of a program's development and its continuous improvement" (p. 3), and the expectation that programs must revitalize and renew their curriculums and educational processes by "pursuing exchanges with the practice community and program stakeholders and by developing and assessing new knowledge and technology" (p. 7), encourage those who value the conduct, use, and dissemination of research as a fundamental aspect of effective service delivery—including the delivery of professional social work education (Cournoyer & Powers, 2002). These passages suggest that BSW and MSW programs must conduct program evaluation and other forms of outcomes-related research related to student learning as a natural and ongoing dimension of their activities and processes. Despite the obstacles inherent in their implementation, we believe that such activities, if undertaken as forms of "scientific inquiry," contribute to an educational

culture in which research and scholarship are normalized and perhaps even valued. We also believe that the overall quality of the educational experience can improve if findings from assessment activities are used to guide changes in curriculum design and in teaching and learning processes. We would be especially pleased if evaluation included assessment of graduates' effectiveness in service to clients (Buchan, 1991; Gambrill, 2001a, 2001b).

The EPAS also states that among the purposes of the social work profession is to "develop and use research, knowledge, and skills that advance social work practice" (CSWE, 2001a, p. 5) and among the purposes of social work education is "to develop social work knowledge" (p. 5). Programs pursue these educational purposes by "developing knowledge" (p. 6) and "preparing social workers to evaluate the processes and effectiveness of practice" (p. 6). In addition, through the foundation curriculum, all BSW and MSW graduates are expected to demonstrate the abilities to "apply critical thinking skills within the context of professional social work practice," to "use theoretical frameworks supported by empirical evidence to understand individual development and behavior across the life span and the interactions among individuals and between individuals and families, groups, organizations, and communities," and to "evaluate research studies, apply research findings to practice, and evaluate their own practice interventions" (p. 8).

These passages and others suggest that social workers should be able to understand, analyze, apply, evaluate, and perhaps synthesize research-based evidence in and for their service to others. If these expectations are implemented and students indeed accomplish the associated learning goals and objectives, we anticipate both improved quality of service to clients and heightened interest in and readiness for doctoral study and perhaps even engagement in service-related research.

The suggested flexibility in the 2001 EPAS may lead some MSW programs to develop "research concentrations" to encourage and enable some students to develop advanced proficiency in research methods. Others may design and offer doctoral "fast-track" curriculums that enable students to proceed efficiently from the baccalaureate to the doctoral degree. We hope it is indeed possible to implement curriculum innovations and concentrations that motivate and prepare social work students for doctoral study.

Concerns

Although we recognize the value of several changes suggested by the new EPAS, we have some concerns. We fail to understand why it does not emphasize preparation of students for advanced levels of higher education. Although we notice the expectation that programs promote "continual professional development of students, faculty, and practitioners" (CSWE, 2001a, p. 6), we would prefer an emphasis upon students' development of knowledge, attitudes, and skills associated with lifelong learning and continuous professional development *while they are enrolled in social work programs*. As suggested by numerous surveys over the years, most social work graduates do not regularly read research articles related to practice innovations or effectiveness (Gambrill, 1999; Holosko & Leslie, 1998). We assert that unless students learn to engage actively in self-directed learning during their

formal educational programs, they are not likely to do so as practicing social workers following graduation.

We certainly value the breadth of knowledge, values, and skills suggested by the foundation program objectives and the descriptions associated with the eight required content areas. However, we find it difficult to imagine how any BSW or MSW program could actually meet all the required expectations. We wonder whether the suggested flexibility and innovation is truly feasible given the nature and extent of the foundation requirements.

In order to illustrate the incredible breadth of learning required by the EPAS, consider the curriculum implications of the foundation program objectives. Although 12 objectives are identified, most subsume additional expectations as well. We have selected one of the 12 to illustrate the enormity of the challenges associated with delivery of the foundation curriculum.

According to the EPAS, graduates should be able to: "Practice without discrimination and with respect, knowledge, and skills related to clients' age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, family structure, gender, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation" (CSWE, 2001a, p. 8). There appear to be dozens of subordinate expectations within this single objective. Fourteen client categories are identified (each of which could be classified by at least two and some by several dimensions) and although "practice" is not specifically described, we presume that the definition is broad and expansive in order to be consistent with a generalist perspective. At least four explicit aspects of practice must be demonstrated in relation to clients within each of the 14 categories: a) practice without discrimination, b) practice with respect, c) practice with knowledge, and d) practice with skills. Presumably, BSW and MSW graduates would not only practice without discrimination and with respect but also with knowledge and skills in service to clients of all ages (e.g., infants, toddlers, children, adolescents, young adults, adults of middle-age, old-age, and old-old age), with clients of all cultures (consider the range within this dimension), with clients of all abilities or disabilities, and with the diverse range of clients with each of the remaining categories.

Given a generalist perspective, we should include the dimensions of system size (e.g., individuals, dyads, families, groups, organizations, communities, societies) which further expands the array of expectations. Although the nature of "knowledge" is not defined, we presume there would be many aspects (e.g., biological, psychological, sociological, economic, legal, spiritual, cultural, as well as knowledge of change processes and practice effectiveness). "Skills" would similarly be multidimensional (e.g., skills in engagement, assessment, contracting, intervention, prevention, evaluation, ending, and follow-up). Imagine the potential number of learning expectations within this single foundation program objective. There are 13 other foundation objectives, eight prescribed content areas, and the expectation that MSW programs also offer advanced practice concentrations. We wonder if depth of knowledge, critical thinking abilities, and research knowledge and skills suffer due to the breadth required in the foundation.

We will spare you from further application of this exercise to the remaining foundation program objectives, or within the expectations contained within the eight

required content areas. We do wonder if, in the absence of clear and precise definitions of terms and a limited, focused array of high priority learning goals, achievement of the foundation program expectations appears impossibly ambitious. A common foundation for all social workers certainly makes sense. However, when the expectations are as extensive and prescriptive as those contained in the EPAS, we ask where we would find curriculum room for advanced concentrations or leeway for genuine innovation?

CONCLUSIONS

We applaud the efforts of the individuals and groups who worked long and hard to update and attempt to streamline the policies and standards that guide social work education in the United States. We recognize their attempt to enhance students' educational experience, advance the profession, and most importantly, improve the quality and effectiveness of services to clients and other persons in need. We believe, however, that four major aspects of the EPAS need additional work. First, the foundation curriculum must become less prescriptive and expansive in order to enable social work programs generally to become more responsive to students' learning needs in a rapidly and continuously changing world. Second, preparation for doctoral level study should be specifically recognized as one of the major purposes of social work education at the BSW and MSW levels. Third, learning to learn, engaging in lifelong learning and assessment of one's own learning are essential abilities in the contemporary information society (Cournoyer & Powers, 2002; Cournoyer & Stanley, 2002). Might we substitute these for one or perhaps a few of the 14 foundation program objectives? Finally, BSW and MSW students should undertake some form of service-related research and prepare a scholarly report (e.g., paper, presentation, or thesis) about the nature and outcomes of their studies. In the absence of a genuine research experience, graduates are unlikely to conduct studies of their own, evaluate the impact of their own practice, or use findings from scientific studies that might improve the quality of their service to clients.

We posit that these steps would help address a truly dire problem facing the profession of social work; that is, the extraordinarily small number of social workers educated at the doctoral level. The profession desperately needs DSW and Ph.D. graduates to teach the expanding number of BSW and MSW students and to conduct practice-related research. We especially need research regarding the effectiveness of services to our most vulnerable population groups and those services that address our most challenging social problems. Psychiatry, psychology, and nursing do a much better job of preparing their professional students for the possibility of additional study at the doctoral level, and, not coincidentally, conducting research related to the effectiveness of psychiatric, psychological, and nursing services for medical and psychiatric problems.

Doctoral level social workers are desperately needed to research the effectiveness of services directed toward the resolution of social problems under-addressed or even ignored by our more medically-oriented sister professions. Research regarding the effectiveness of programs and service models designed to help people overcome poverty and oppression, alleviate domestic violence, prevent child abuse, promote effective parental involvement, or learn interpersonal and self-

advocacy skills would be examples of the kinds of studies that social workers might pursue that psychiatrists, psychologists, and nurses might not.

We propose that social work educators must, as a matter of course, prepare and encourage talented BSW and MSW students to pursue doctoral study. We suggest that BSW and MSW programs incorporate—formally or informally—educational policies, standards, and objectives that reflect the goals of:

1. Encouraging substantial numbers of BSW and MSW students to pursue additional social work education at the doctoral level;
2. Preparing substantial numbers of BSW and MSW students for the rigorous academic requirements of doctoral level education and research, and;
3. Promoting increased practice-effectiveness research undertaken by social workers.

We suggest that these measures might well yield an increase in the number of social workers prepared at the doctoral level and thereby meet an urgent need within the profession for additional educators and researchers. Furthermore, emphasis upon these competencies might well enhance students' educational experience, advance the profession, and, most importantly, improve the quality and effectiveness of services to clients and other persons in need.

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