SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: A FUTURE OF STRENGTH OR PERIL

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Abstract: *In a dynamically changing world and one in which higher education generally is challenged by a scarcity of resources and the ever present need to justify the results of its mission and purpose, social work education faces an uncertain and perhaps perilous future. But rather than succumbing to pessimism, one should consider the strengths that social work education brings to the academy. The authors suggest the major challenges that face social work education in the coming decade and tie these to active initiatives on the part of social work educators in shaping a positive and dynamic future within the academy.*

Keywords: Social work education trends, future, teaching

INTRODUCTION

Social work education has enjoyed healthy respect and substantially positive development within the academy for at least the past 50 years of existence of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Although there are the expected tensions among universities with differing missions and purposes as well as degree levels, social work education has maintained a long term focus on education for the profession while at the same time struggling to define its theoretical and knowledge base, its practice competencies, its research priorities, and its strength within the academy. In a healthy educational and professional environment, these tensions and struggles are not only to be expected, but they serve as an essential element in the process of academic and professional renewal.

The numbers of CSWE accredited social work programs have grown dramatically over the past two decades from a total of 427 in 1985 to 617 in 2005, an increase of 44 percent (CSWE, 1985, & CSWE, 2005). At the master's level in the past four years alone, there has been an increase of 29 programs or an increase of 17 percent with an additional 18 programs in candidacy status. At the baccalaureate level the corresponding numbers are 21 new programs or an increase of almost 5 percent and 20 programs in candidacy status (CSWE, 2000, & CSWE 2005). Reference frequently is made to a "proliferation" of programs as being highly questionable or outright negative with respect to decreasing market share and educational quality. On the other hand, this expansion can be viewed as a healthy step toward meeting market demand and ensuring educational access to a more place bound and older student population. The fundamental tension between matters of access to education and quality of education reaches far beyond social work and will continue to occupy a prominent position in academic discourse for the foreseeable future. For our purposes, the unanswered question is what is it about social work education that makes it so attractive to institutions to initiate new programs even under conditions of fiscal distress?

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Although the numbers of programs has increased, it is factually accurate, however, that the number of students enrolled as well as the number of degrees granted annually at the master's and the baccalaureate levels since 1998 has remained fairly stable at approximately 25,000 in 1998 and 25,683 in 2003. At the same time that overall student enrollments have inched slowly downward, the number of social work faculty members has increased in the aggregate (across all educational levels) by approximately 1,000 (about 16 percent between 1998 and 2003), perhaps in part as a result of the increased numbers of programs. Therefore, overall, one might infer that with increased numbers of programs and stable numbers of students and graduates, supply has outstripped demand and prompts caution about the future. It is worth noting that student enrollments are not the only variable of value in determining institutional or program viability, but they certainly are not ignored by university and college administrators whose responsibility is to fund programs in their institutions that they determine serve effectively and efficiently, the broader educational purposes of the institution. In spite of how wonderful programs may be perceived by students, the community, and the faculty, small programs with low enrollments are highly vulnerable in most colleges and universities especially in today's environment.

QUESTIONS AND FIVE KEY CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

From this brief overview of the statistics reported annually by social work education programs and the Commission on Accreditation, is the emergence of a number of questions having serious implications for the future of social work education: Are potential students seeking other educational opportunities for preparation to work in the human services sector; are social work curricula and their formats relevant to the 21st Century, based, for example, on such dynamics as physiological clinical advances, globalism and the rapid transformation to a digital information society; is social work a primary stakeholder in the academy with appropriate administrative recognition and allocation of the necessary resources to achieve its goals and objectives; and fundamentally, is the social work education enterprise sustainable in a dynamic new century and a higher education environment that values research over teaching, cost containment over intellectual and curricular innovation, and digitization over traditional pedagogy and human resource development?

Unmasking these questions suggests several issues that must be the focus of our ongoing dialogue and discussion to ensure the future strength of social work education. In the briefness of this paper, we will highlight several of the most pressing issues and suggest the major steps to dissuade from peril and ensure a strong future for social work education.

The first issue is spelled out in a recent article by the late Frank Newman, et. al. (Newman, Couturier & Scurry, 2004) in which it is asserted that higher education is not meeting the public's needs. Relevancy is compromised by the academy's difficulty, for whatever reasons, in attending to efficiency and productivity, its inattention to degree attainment, and the overall failure to reward teaching in ways similar to that of research. The latter observation is an especially blunt critique, and suggests that social work educators must engage in a robust dialogue about the respective relevance of teaching and research in professional social work education. Do we serve the public trust and do we serve in the public interest? If so, then how is social work education meeting the needs of the 21st Century? Do we educate students with our lens on educational outcomes, educational attainment,

and do we do it in an efficient as well as effective manner? Does our research provide sufficient evidence that our practice interventions are effective? If we are not able to articulate and demonstrate that our programs are relevant to the 21st Century, we certainly will be challenged more vigorously by the encroachment of other degree programs into our domain and we will be starved financially by our institutions as they look to fund programs that have broad public support and perceived relevancy.

Second, if social work education is seen as irrelevant to the 21st Century, that is, in its preparation of practitioners and scholars, this challenge could not come at a more troubling time, a time of severe financial distress characteristic of many colleges and universities. Financial distress affects our ability to adequately fund institutional financial aid – including graduate student stipends and research fellowships, salaries and benefits, and operations, including research and technology – all of the commonly agreed upon quality indicators in higher education. Organizational economies in shaping delivery and governance structures suggest the trend toward more social work programs becoming part of larger administrative units. Resource scarcity is the most prevalent reason documented by the CSWE Commission on Accreditation (COA), for actual social work program noncompliance issues or program closure as opposed, for example, to changes in the institutional mission. Certainly mission may be changed in order to bolster the financial picture of an institution or create a new relevancy for the institution, but this is a related issue for yet another discussion.

To deal overall with this financially troubling situation will require innovative and flexible strategies in teaching and learning and a consistent demonstration of relevance to the 21st Century. It is also no secret that tensions exist between teaching and learning and research productivity, further heightening the internal disharmony in a fiscally distressed institution. In fact, the financial crisis intensifies the demand on faculty for externally funded research, and further undermines the emphasis on quality teaching by regular faculty.

A third major challenge for the future of social work education is the preparation of doctoral educated faculty. It is clear that although the numbers of doctoral programs has increased by 25 percent (from 53 to 66 programs) in the last decade, the annual production of doctoral degree recipients has increased only slightly from 229 in 1993 to 289 in 2002, (Lennon, 1993, & 2002). At the same time, the average number of degrees awarded per program has increased from 4.3 to 4.6 annually. While there may be an expected upturn in these numbers as newly developed programs award their first doctoral degrees, we will be hard pressed to meet the demand, now estimated to be 3-4 academic positions open for each doctoral degree recipient in any one year. The demand will be particularly acute with many academics preparing to retire within the next five years and the requirements of so many institutions to hire doctoral prepared faculty.

The fourth challenge we face has to do specifically with how our educational programs are structured and what is taught in them – the curriculum. At all levels of social work education and in all programs, regardless of geographic location, concentrations, or defined outcomes and objectives, the fundamental task is to educate students with the intellectual competencies for practice relevant to the 21st Century. Yet, we as educators have only recently embarked upon that discussion – of what are the intellectual competencies, what

is relevant to this Century? What is the fit between what we teach in our social work programs and the competencies required in the practice setting? This important work is being developed by the CSWE Commission on Curriculum and Educational Innovation (CO-CEI) as it prepares for the revision of the Education Policy Statement and, subsequently, the next edition of Accreditation Standards. Our task is to fully understand the intellectual competencies that will be required for practice in the coming decades and to translate those understandings into appropriate curriculum content and delivery structures.

At the baccalaureate or entry level of practice, it is specifically to the liberal arts that we should be turning our attention. Although the liberal arts form the base for further education, the substance and processes should be a purposeful part of the entire four years of the student's educational experience. The liberal arts are key to developing the habits of mind that contribute to appropriate intellectual competencies including critical thinking, problem solving, team work, creativity, intellectual honesty, evidence seeking, question formation, and ethical behavior. Moreover, social work students, at the baccalaureate as well as the master's levels, must be intellectually driven by ideas as opposed to ideology. The intellectual competencies, requiring our attention in definition and substance, must be based not only in academically rigorous curricula, but serve as the groundwork for entry level social work practice as well as graduate education at the master's and doctoral levels. It is essential that students be adequately prepared for intellectual discovery as well as the challenges faced by social workers as part of a global community.

At the master's level, how we define foundation content, how we envision concentrations, how we incorporate and reinforce the values and skills of rigorous research and intellectual inquisitiveness are fundamental to our success in being relevant to the 21st Century.

One final challenge to the traditional social work curriculum is the increasing importance of on-line learning, especially web based course delivery. In the 2000 – 2001 academic year, about ninety percent of America's public institutions of higher education offered electronic learning and around sixty percent participated in a consortium (or virtual university) of Universities offering such learning opportunities (Epper & Garn, 2003). On-line and other forms of distance learning challenge several traditional, core academic values including autonomy, collegiality, liberal education and related degrees, the authority of the faculty over the curriculum, and a site based community of learning. Distance and on-line learning disperses faculty and students; emphasizes proprietary coursework and standardized courses; focuses on part-time faculty; favors training and specialized credentialing over the granting of a traditional degree; and puts lessened importance on place in learning (Eaton, 2000). Social work education must address these challenges to its traditional academic values, especially in terms of student socialization and faculty control of the curriculum.

Social work and other professions, however, have been slow to adopt distance learning methods. As reported in a survey of specialized accreditors, about 76 percent of the 50 specialized accrediting bodies report that at least some of their programs use distance learning. When individual programs are examined, however, only about 18 percent of the total number of accredited programs report offering such instruction (CHEA, 2002).

Among distance education methods, on-line learning will have an especially profound impact on social work education. Fully on-line accredited programs in nursing and counseling offered by proprietary institutions serve as models for those who wish to study social work on-line and whose lives require flexibility and greater accessibility to learning than what is offered by traditional institutional arrangements. Questions for social work education regarding on-line education include how to teach, what to teach, and how to adapt it to field education.

Our own task at intellectual discovery for future relevant practice is an enormous challenge that will require the very best thinking and creativity on the part of social work educators. But this task it is not in a context of isolation. The fifth challenge is acknowledging, facing and influencing a rapidly globalizing environment. The world in which we live and work is one where geographic boundaries are permeable and where access to information is both rapid and almost universal. Given observational as opposed to values consensus on this point, then social work students must be well prepared, not only in the liberal arts, social and behavioral theory, research and knowledge dissemination, they must have cross cultural practice and policy experiences based in a complex of international academic and work experiences that not only expose them to but require of them new ways of thinking, behaving, and understanding. The study of foreign languages, cross-cultural content, international politics, peace studies, history and the cultural heritage of non-Western societies help form an appropriate intellectual base for the 21st Century (Healy, 1990).

Yet such a base is not highly prevalent. For example, in U.S. higher education generally, there are approximately 160,000 U.S. students who study abroad in any one academic year and there are slightly more than half a million foreign students who study annually in the United States. Because of the current situation related to U.S. national security and the prevailing isolationist view, this number has dropped by 5 percent in the most recent years since September 11, 2002. In social work, the percent of international students receiving doctoral degrees annually hovers around 10 percent and has not varied substantially over the past decade (Lennon, 1995 – 2003). Through the newly launched CSWE Katherine A. Kendall Institute for International Social Work Education (KAKI) and the CSWE Commission on Global Social Work Education (CGSWE), social work education will have new avenues for support of its international and global initiatives as well as a base and guidelines for determining the substantive relevance of internationalism in social work education.

CONCLUSION: CAN WE OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES?

These mounting challenges are significant enough independent of one another and if not addressed, they will place social work education in a perilous position for the coming decades. But more importantly, however, they test the capacity of social work education to create effective leadership and establish external and internal partnerships of strength and opportunity. Multiple opportunities exist within social work education to provide leadership. Examples include deans and directors of graduate programs, directors of BSW programs, field education directors, and elected and voluntary positions within social work and multidisciplinary professional organizations. The leadership that is required to meet the challenge, however, is within the academy itself. Social work education needs to

assume positions of influence within their colleges and universities, serving on campus wide search and curriculum committees, participating in strategic planning initiatives and institutional accreditation efforts. Recognizing this need for leadership development, the CSWE has created a Commission on Professional Development and within it, a Council on Leadership Development. The primary anticipated goal of the newly formed Council will be the establishment of a Leadership Institute to serve the current and emerging needs of social work educators for fulfilling leadership positions in the academy.

Is our professional and educational survival at stake? It is clear that it certainly is being challenged. But our greatest strength of leadership will be found in the incorporation of the preeminence of partnership into the very fabric of all social work educationally related organizations and the construction of closer partnerships within our individual colleges or universities. This strategy underscores the need to acknowledge the strengths and the shortcomings that each organization brings to the agenda, to develop a common consensus about our future, and act to achieve that commonly held consensus. We must think and act differently within the context of the larger national and international issues to be addressed, otherwise we risk becoming irrelevant to the 21st Century. Our conversations must transcend the artificial and antagonistic boundaries of we and they often spoken in ideological terms and focus on the big ideas that will give meaning to the future and ensure our professional survival. Isolation will not help our cause; it will only exacerbate the risks to our survival. Social work education has a future of strength if we focus our energies on being the future leaders in the academy and understand that that future is highly dependent on what we do today in conceptualizing social work education in the promotion of diversity, human rights, social and economic justice and global peace and security.

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