Denise E. Bronson

Ohio State University

CURRENT TRENDS IN U.S. SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: EXAMPLES FROM THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK

Abstract

Educational programming for professional social workers in the United States is generally acknowledged to have begun in the late 19th century with the training provided for those serving the urban poor in New York's Charity Organization Societies (Ginsberg 2005; *The Road to 1952: AASSW and NASSA*; http://www.cswe.org/About/57763/57765.aspx). From its beginning social work education has been shaped by the social issues and service contexts impacting those who are disadvantaged due to economic hardship, social injustices, disabilities, or systemic oppression. As social issues have changed over time so too has the focus of social work education, the types of knowledge and skills taught, and the breadth of education that is now considered critical to the success of professional social workers.

Key words: social work education, curricula, Ohio State University

The Council on Social Work Education

The earliest social work education programs in the United States were independently established in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and St. Louis within a 15 year time period at the turn of the 20th century (*The Road to 1952: AASSW and NASSA*; http://www.cswe.org/About/57763/57765.aspx) and by time the Association of Training Schools for Professional Social Workers was formed in 1919 (later called American Association of Schools of Social Work, or AASSW) there were 17 social work programs in existence (Barker 1995). As more educational programs were added, the AASSW introduced accrediting policies in 1932 and, later in 1937, required that accredited social work programs be affiliated with institutions of higher education. Eventually the AASSW was dissolved when the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) was established in 1952. Today CSWE is the accrediting body for all bachelors (BSW) and master's (MSW) degree programs in the United States.

The history of social work education at The Ohio State University mirrors the evolution of social work education in the United States. According to the College of Social Work website,

> Social Work has a long and rich tradition at The Ohio State University, starting with our very first social work course offered in 1875. We conveyed our first Bachelor of Social Service in 1916, our first Master's degree in 1923, and our first doctorate in 1934. First accredited in 1919, the College of Social Work is the oldest continuously accredited public social work program in the country (*Mission and History*; http://csw.osu.edu/about/mission-history/).

This tradition of educational excellence for social work continues today at Ohio State. Today CSWE is the accrediting body for 511 baccalaureate social work programs and 245 master's social work programs (http://www.cswe.org/Membership/27021.aspx). The 80 doctoral programs in social work are not currently subject to accreditation. The CSWE Council on Accreditation establishes the educational policy and accreditation standards (EPAS) by which social educational programs are assessed every seven years. The most recent EPAS was approved in 2015 (*Program Membership*; http://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/83963.aspx) and reflects the changing nature of social work education and practice in the United States.

Current Trends in Social Work Education

Competency-Based Education

Beginning in 2008 CSWE adopted competency-based standards for the educational policy and accreditation standards (EPAS) for assessing social work educational programs. Competency-based education shifts the focus from assessing how the curriculum is taught to measuring student learning outcomes. All social work programs are required to establish measurable educational goals that assess the extent to which students have mastered the knowledge, attitudes, values, skills and behaviors for successful social work practice (Regan, Detlaff 2016). Using the competency-based model introduced in other professional educational programs and in higher education accreditation more generally, the most recent 2015 CSWE EPAS identifies nine knowledge and skill competencies that all successful graduates of social work programs must demonstrate (*Reaffirmation – 2015 EPAS*; http://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/83963.aspx). The nine competencies are:

Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior.

Competency 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice.

Competency 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice.

Competency 4: Engage in Practice-Informed Research and Research-Informed Practice.

Competency 5:   Engage in Policy Practice.

Competency 6:   Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities.

Competency 7:   Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities.

Competency 8:   Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities.

Competency 9:   Evaluate Practice with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities (*2015 EPAS*; http://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/EPASRevision.aspx).

Direct measurement of the students' mastery of these competencies occurs both in the classroom and during the field education practicum. At the OSU College of Social Work the competencies taught in each course are listed on the course syllabus. It defines the skills and knowledge that successful students in the course will master during the semester and the ways in which those competencies will be assessed. The students' learning is assessed by various class assignments such as role plays, discussions, written papers, and presentations. Online discussion boards and real-time quizzes using classroom technology are also used. Rubrics and guidelines are developed to specify how students are expected to demonstrate their mastery of the course competencies and to guide the instructors grading of each assignment.

The field practicum offers another opportunity for students to demonstrate their learning. Their mastery of the competencies is assessed and recorded on the Student Learning Agreement that is completed by the supervising field instructor and submitted each semester to the college (*Take Education into the Community*; http://csw.osu.edu/field-education/). The learning agreement operationalizes the CSWE competencies for each field practicum setting and promotes an open discussion between the student and field instructor as to what will expected for successfully completing the internship. At the conclusion of each semester the field instructor assesses the student's mastery of each item on the Learning Agreement and provides feedback on their performance. These data are reported to the university as part of the university's reaccreditation and posted on the college's website annually to inform prospective students on the college's success in preparing our graduates for their social work careers.

Field Education as the Signature Pedagogy

Throughout the history of social work education direct, hands-on experiences in the field have been a critical part of social work training. Today, field education is considered the

"signature pedagogy" of social work education and all students are expected to complete an internship in a social work setting. The CSWE EPAS states,

> Signature pedagogies are elements of instruction and of socialization that teach future practitioners the fundamental dimensions of professional work in their discipline – to think, to perform, and to act ethically and with integrity (CSWE 2015: 12).

BSW and MSW students are required to complete a minimum of 400 hours and 900 hours, respectively, in a supervised internship during which they apply the knowledge and skills gained in the classroom (CSWE 2015: 13).

The College of Social Work at Ohio State University works with over 800 social service agencies to provide field education experiences in a wide variety of settings. For example, students interested in child abuse and neglect may be placed in any of the 88 Ohio county public child welfare agencies, those interested in aging will have opportunities to work in nursing homes or adult day-care facilities, or students may opt to train in a school or criminal justice setting. One of the most popular and growing fields of practice is that dealing with behavioral or integrated healthcare. Students with this interest may choose to serve their internship in one of several hospital or behavioral health settings in the area. Increasingly, the medical community is recognizing the impact of social factors on health and wellness outcomes and the extra value that social workers bring to this endeavor. All student interns are supervised by a social worker in their internships to insure that the values and ethical practices of social work are instilled as the students develop their practice skills and knowledge.

Generalist Practice and Specializations

Since its inception, social work education has been defined by the changing nature of the knowledge and skills required to address the changing needs of those served by social workers. Students entering their social work programs are trained as "generalist practitioners" which prepares them to "use a range of prevention and intervention methods in their practice with diverse individuals, families, groups, organization and communities based on scientific inquiry and best practices" (CSWE 2015: 11). The undergraduate programs in social work and the first year of the master's degree in social work provide the generalist foundation content. As students move into the second year of the MSW program they are given the opportunity to receive specialized training at the micro or macro level in fields such as aging, mental health, substance abuse, military social work, health, child welfare, schools, criminal justice, or food security. The advanced specialization courses are often organized around fields of practice (such as those previously mentioned), populations (e.g. children, the elderly, those with developmental disabilities or families), or type of practice (e.g. direct or clinical practice, administrative practice, community practice or policy practice). Each social work program organizes its curriculum differently but all are required to

insure that students master the foundation and advanced competencies required for successful social work careers.

At OSU the advanced courses are organized by fields of practice specializations. We currently offer four specializations (Health & Aging, Mental Health & Substance Abuse, Child & Youth Services, and Community & Social Justice) and students are required to complete seminar courses for at least one specialization. A new specialization is currently being developed in Integrated Behavioral Health Care in response to community and practice needs. The seminars provide the context for the specialization and cover current theories, policies, best intervention practices, and current issues. Students also complete the field education practicum in their area of specialization. In addition, students complete advanced courses on intervention methods (e.g. clinical practice with adults, assessment and diagnosis, motivational interviewing, behavioral methods, grant writing, and strategic planning) that they apply to their specialization area, and they also complete a sequence of courses on how to evaluate the outcomes of the services and programs provided. This model provides maximum flexibility and allows for specializations to be removed or added based on changes in the practice community, faculty composition, and student interests.

Distance Learning

One of the most significant, and controversial developments in social work education in recent years is the introduction of distance learning programs in the United States. Internet access and online education has already transformed learning in ways comparable to the invention of writing, moveable type, and steam-powered printing presses (Darnton 2008; Davidson 2011; Mehaffy 2015). Driven by technological advances and student demand, the number of fully online social work degree programs is growing exponentially. The CSWE website currently lists 13 BSW programs and 54 MSW programs offered as distance learning programs (*Online and Distance Education*; http://www.cswe.org/cms/39516. aspx) but many more are under development and will begin admitting students in the near future. The number of students enrolled in these programs ranges from 20–2400 with participants coming from around the globe. With the advent of online social work programs students no longer face geographical restrictions in advancing their social work education. Students appreciate the convenience of completing a social work degree in their homes without time-consuming and costly trips to a university, and universities benefit financially from enrolling more students, charging distance learning fees, and reaching a broader market of potential students. The long-term implications for online social work education will dramatically impact every aspect of social work education including how social work courses are designed and taught, faculty teaching styles and preparation, and student expectations for social work programs.

The pervasiveness of distance education in social work education is evident in the number and type of presentations given at the 2015 and 2016 conferences on social work distance education (http://swde.iu.edu/). The topics covered every aspect of online

programming including how to develop an online social work program (Cupp, Roush 2016a), how to prepare faculty for online teaching (Paloff 2016a), student recruitment and orientation (Yankeelov, Faul, Mathis 2016), revising courses and instructional tools (Rine 2016; Paloff 2016b), teaching practice skills online (Fitch, Kaplan 2016), and managing field internships for online learners (Whiton-O'Brien, Crowley 2016; Elliott-Remes, Bowden 2016). Despite numerous concerns expressed about how well online programs can prepare students for social work practice, it is unlikely to deter universities and social work programs from expanding the number of distance education options available to social work students.

The College of Social Work is also joining the growing number of online MSW programs. Beginning in 2016 semester students have the option to complete the mental health and substance abuse specialization fully online. Over the next few years additional online courses will be developed allowing students to complete the entire MSW curriculum without ever visiting campus. The college is investing considerable resources to support this endeavor such as hiring two full-time instructional designers, providing financial incentives to faculty to develop online courses, training MSW advisors to support online students, and expanding the number and location of field placement sites to accommodate online learners. The efforts at OSU to develop online programming has focused primarily on the MSW program as recent research suggests that older, working students who may also be juggling the demands of family are more interested in the flexibility of an online program (Parker, Lenhart, Moore 2011).

Employment

One of the factors supporting the expansion of both online and on-the-ground social work educational programs is the continuing strength of the job market for BSW and MSW social work graduates. *U.S. World and News Report* (2016) consistently lists social work positions as among the best jobs in terms of the number of available jobs, median salary, and unemployment rates. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) sponsors a career/jobs website (http://careers.socialworkers.org/) which provides a listing of employment opportunities and salaries for social workers; it clearly demonstrates the breadth of employment options for those with BSW or MSW degrees. The diversity of fields in which social workers practice is one of the primary attractions for those seeking social work careers. For example, social workers (1) provide direct services in child welfare, mental health, substance abuse, schools, hospitals, and numerous other settings, (2) serve as agency executive directors and administrators in non-profit agencies, governmental agencies, and for-profit settings, (3) engage in community practice, and (4) play a key role in public policy analysis and implementation. The availability of social work positions has contributed to the growing number of social work educational programs in both on-the-ground and online formats.

The undergraduate social work (BSSW) and graduate social work (MSW) programs strive to prepare graduates for the employment opportunities in Ohio and the national

job market while acknowledging that each community faces its own social service challenges and needs. For example, in central Ohio the Somali immigrant community often needs supportive services but face linguistic and cultural barriers in obtaining those services. The College of Social Work is collaborating with a local social service agency and the OSU Department of African American and African Studies to create a social work specialization to prepare graduates for employment in this community. Similarly we are adding courses on integrated behavioral health, services to military veterans and their families, and advanced non-profit management training to fill the need for degreed social workers in these areas. The undergraduate program has added a minor in Substance Abuse Services to prepare a larger workforce of those trained to address the growing opiate drug problem in many rural areas of the country. To insure that graduates are trained to deal with the shifting focus of social work practice, the curriculum in the OSU College of Social Work is constantly reviewed to insure its relevance to the local community and the changing nature of social work employment.

Future of Social Work Education

The nature of social work practice in the United States requires educational programs that are fluid and flexible in order to quickly adjust to emerging social issues, new evidence on best practices, technology, and shifting social policies. Social work education today looks very different from the first courses offered over a hundred years ago but the inherent values and ethics which guide the profession are largely the same. The faces of those impacted by economic hardship, social injustices, disabilities, or systemic oppression have changed over time and the interventions used to address these social ills have certainly evolved but the unmitigated need for educated, professional social workers is evident in the strength of the job market. The value of competency-based education, the importance of field internships, and the importance of flexible specializations in social work programs seems to be accepted components of future social work education, but whether future social workers will obtain those degrees in online or on-the-ground courses is harder to predict. Only time will tell how social work education adapts to the changing social issues and technological advances on the horizon but given the adaptability of social work education and the fundamental principles of social work practice it is certain that social work will continue to be a viable and valued profession in the United States.

References

2015 EPAS; http://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/EPASRevision.aspx (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Barker R. (1995). *Milestones in the development of social work and social welfare 1900 to 1950. Social Work Dictionary*, 3rd edition. Washington, D.C., NASW Press; http://www.socialworkers.org/profession/centennial/milestones_3.htm (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Cupp K., Roush B. (2016a). *Collaborating with instructions designers – what faculty and administrators need to know*. Paper presented at the Social Work Distance Education Conference, April 13–15, Indianapolis, IN; http://swde.iu.edu/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Cupp K., Roush B. (2016b*). Creating an administrative structure to support the development of online programs*. Paper presented at the Social Work Distance Education Conference, April 13–15, Indianapolis, IN; http://swde.iu.edu/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), Commission on Educational Policy and the CSWE Commission on Accreditation (2015). *2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate and Master's Social Work Programs.* Alexandria, VA, Council on Social Work Education.

Council on Social Work Education; http://www.cswe.org/About/57763/57765.aspx. (accessed: 23.11.2013).

Darnton R. (2008). *The library in the new age.* "The New York Review of Books", 55 (10); http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21515 (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Davidson C.N. (2011). *The history of distraction, 4000 BCE to the present*; http://www.cathydavidson.com/blog/the-history-of-distraction-4000-bce-to-the-present/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Elliott-Remes R., Bowden S. (2016). *Challenges in teaching an online field seminar*. Paper presented at the Social Work Distance Education Conference, April 13–15, Indianapolis, IN; http://swde.iu.edu/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Fitch D., Kaplan M. (2016). *How to use web videoconferencing to teach social work practice skills*. Paper presented at the Social Work Distance Education Conference, April 13–15, Indianapolis, IN; http://swde.iu.edu/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Ginsberg L. (2005). *Social Work Education in the United States*. "Portularia", V(1): 45–58.

Maheffy G. (2015). *Universities in the 21st Century: Peril and promise in a new age.* Keynote address at the Social Work Distance Education Conference, April 15–17, Indianapolis, IN; http://swde.iu.edu/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Mission and history; http://csw.osu.edu/about/mission-history/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Online and distance education; http://www.cswe.org/cms/39516.aspx (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Paloff R. (2016a). *Faculty excellence in online teaching.* Paper presented at the Social Work Distance Education Conference, April 13–15, Indianapolis, IN; http://swde.iu.edu/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Paloff R. (2016b). *Can you do the flip? Designing blended learning using the flipped approach.* Paper presented at the Social Work Distance Education Conference, April 13–15, Indianapolis, IN; http://swde.iu.edu (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Parker K., Lenhart A., Moore K. (2011). *The digital revolution and higher education: College Presidents, public differ on value of online learning.* Washington, DC, PEW Research Center; http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2011/08/online-learning.pdf (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Program membership; http://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/83963.aspx (accessed: 29.04.2016).

Reaffirmation – 2015 EPAS; http://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/83963.aspx (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Regan J.A.C., Detlaf A. (2016). *Understanding and assessing competence: Challenges associated with the competency-based approach to social work education*, in: I. Taylor, M. Bogo,

M. Lefevre, B. Teater (eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Social Work Education*, Chapter 3: 27–37. Routledge, New York, NY.

Rine C. (2016). *Challenges and strategies for program re-accreditation: EPAS 2015 and beyond*. Paper presented at the Social Work Distance Education Conference, April 13–15, Indianapolis, IN; http://swde.iu.edu/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Take education into the community; http://csw.osu.edu/field-education/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).

The Road to 1952: AASSW and NASSA; http://www.cswe.org/About/57763/57765.aspx (accessed: 23.11.2016).

U.S. News and World Report (2016); http://money.usnews.com/careers (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Yankeelov P., Faul A., Mathis L. (2016). *Beyond start-up, current challenges and solutions at the Kent School of Social Work*. Paper presented at the Social Work Distance Education Conference, April 13–15, Indianapolis, IN; http://swde.iu.edu/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).

Whiton-O'Brien K., Crowley D. (2016). *From the mountains to the prairies: A national online model for training field instructors*. Paper presented at the Social Work Distance Education Conference, April 13–15, Indianapolis, IN; http://swde.iu.edu/ (accessed: 23.11.2016).