

SOCIAL WORK IN THE U.S.: WORKFORCE & EDUCATION¹

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Abstract: Specialized education and training for social workers have been available in the U.S. for over 100 years. Currently, there are over 500 university programs for bachelor-level social work (a four year university degree) and over 230 for graduate-level work (or post-bachelor level). While there are differences among these programs, accreditation serves to assure some commonalities for the preparation of professional social workers. The Council on Social Work Education or CSWE is the sole accrediting body for social work programs in the U.S. The accreditation process assures that programs prepare students with specific and identifiable knowledge, skills, values and behaviors required for competent social work practice. In this plenary presentation for the *Socio Plus conference, Strategies and Ways to Develop University Curricula in the Area of Social Work Education*, the author provides an overview of the practice environments and workforce trends for social workers in the U.S. and discusses prescribed competencies for social workers and key components common to all social work programs U.S., while offering some examples of curriculum.

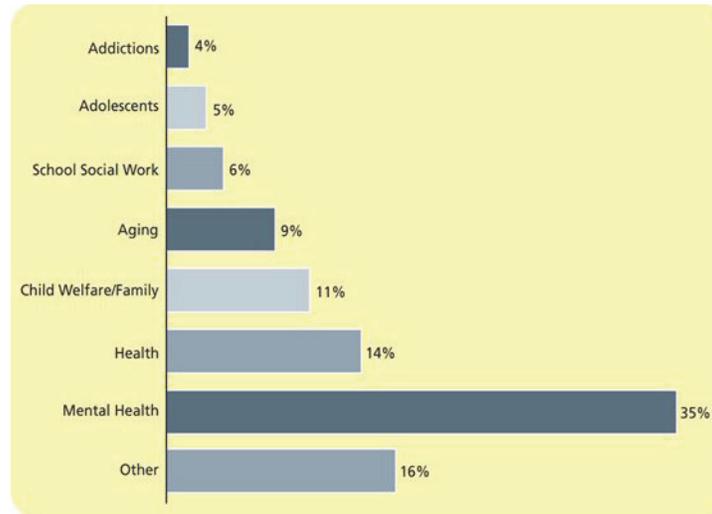
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There are approximately 607,000 baccalaureate- and masters-level social workers in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). As Table 1 below indicates, social work in the U.S. is a varied

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profession, with professionals employed in fields as diverse as child and family services to health or medical work with the largest proportion of workers (35%) employed in mental health services. This variation of populations served and problems addressed by social workers speaks to both the range and capabilities of the discipline of social work but also to the complexity of the educational needs in order to prepare students for such varied work.

Table 1
Percent of Social Workers in Fields of
Social Work in U.S.



(Source: National Association of Social Workers, 2014)

To prepare the social work workforce, educational programs in colleges and universities operate at several levels: the Baccalaureate degree (typically designed for students to take approximately 40 courses over a four year period of time), the Master's degree (typically designed for students to take approximately about 20 courses over a two year period of time), and the Doctoral-level degrees [either a PhD in Social Work or Doctorate of Social Work (DSW), which on average take approximately six years to complete] (Council on Social Work Education, 2014). As Table 2 below indicates, there are hundreds of programs operating at the current time.

Table 2
Number of Educational Programs in U.S.

Program Level	Number in U.S.
BSW	499
MSW	233
PhD/DSW	80

(Source: Council on Social Work Education, 2014)

To ensure the enactment of some shared standards, the quality of programs, and a common identity, social work education at the Baccalaureate- and Master-level is accredited by an independent, non-governmental organization, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). (Doctoral-level programs are not accredited through CSWE.) CSWE is the sole accrediting body of social work education in the U.S. (It should be noted that universities are also accredited through regional accrediting agencies that are independent organizations whose authority is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. All CSWE-accredited programs operate in universities that are accredited through their regional agency. So, not only does the university go through an accreditation process but its social work program also goes through an additional one conducted by CSWE.) To become CSWE accredited, social work programs must demonstrate a need for the program in their geographical area, the staff and material resources are available to support the program, and the readiness for curricular and program implementation. The process for a new program to become accredited takes several years to complete. After initial accreditation, programs undergo the re-accreditation process in four years and thereafter, every eight years.

The accreditation requirements include attention to program functions and structure. Programs must demonstrate that they are rooted in the community, that is, that they are meeting community needs in terms of preparation of workers for the community and other activities such as participating in local events. Programs must also show that faculty are involved in the university and in the development of curricula and that students' educational and professional development needs are met both through curriculum and through other program activities. In order to meet these requirements, CSWE sets forth minimum requirements for program structure (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). These requirements include that each program has a director who organizes and manages program activities, that there are a minimum of two faculty for undergraduate (BSW) and five for graduate (MSW)

programs but more are required dependent upon the number of students in the program, and that there is a director of field who organizes and manages field education activities. Each director must have administrative time and so cannot teach the same number of courses as program faculty do. For field directors and BSW program directors, 25% of their time must be devoted to administrative activities and for Master's-level directors, 50% of their time is. This ensures that programs continue to dedicate their resources to those operations that maintain a stable program.

Curricular functioning is also a key component of accreditation. While the way in which curriculum is designed and delivered is not prescribed by CSWE, accreditation requires that graduates of social work programs achieve specific competencies. The following competencies are currently required of all graduates at both the undergraduate (BSW) and graduate (MSW) levels, with Master's level students requiring an advanced level of competency (Council on Social Work Education, 2015):

- Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior
- Engage diversity and difference in practice
- Advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice
- Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice
- Engage in policy practice
- Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
- Assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
- Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
- Evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities

While these competencies are standard for all programs, programs can add to these and can slightly modify them so as to fit their context, which includes the community's needs and the university's mission and goals. For example, in order to be responsive to the community needs and university's purposes, a program operating in a teaching university in a rural southern area will need to prepare its students differently than a program operating in a research university in a large city. In this, social work looks different in rural areas, as resources tend to be fewer, access to services is limited, and relationships among providers and clients are more intimate. Thus, the rural social work program must prepare their

students to navigate this terrain, while the urban social work program must prepare their students for an entirely different set of circumstances.

In general, the shared elements of curricular design for all programs as outlined in the competencies include a number of key content areas. First, it is embedded within the competencies that students have theoretical base. While programs can choose the theories they focus on, it is typical for programs to include theories of human development, psychodynamic theories, theories of cognitive and behavioral development and social theories. Research is also a required content area. Again, how it is approached may vary, and programs may expose students to proposal writing, evaluation, or carrying out a research project. Practice is a major content area in programs and will cover practice theories, techniques, and methods at the micro, mezzo and macro levels of intervention. Another major content area is policy, in which students learn how policies are created and influenced at the agency, local, and national levels. Field experience is required of all accredited programs and students perform 400 hours in practicum at the undergraduate level (BSW) and 900 hours in practicum at the graduate level (MSW).

Finally, and quite importantly, ethics is a major content area found in the competencies. As determined by CSWE, social work values and ethics are central to the profession. CSWE utilizes the ethical guide developed by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), a non-profit, non-governmental association. At this time, the Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2008) entails the following values and ethics:

Value: Service

Ethical Principle: Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.

Value: Social Justice

Ethical Principle: Social workers challenge social injustice.

Value: Dignity and Worth of the Person

Ethical Principle: Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.

Value: Importance of Human Relationships

Ethical Principle: Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.

Value: Integrity

Ethical Principle: Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.

Value: Competence

Ethical Principle: Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.

These six values and their related ethical principles form the foundation for both social work practice and for the education of social workers. For many programs, this means reinforcing these values and ethics in every course and some programs have an entire course dedicated to the ethical guidelines. Thus, we maintain that social work in the U.S. is an ethics-based profession. The theories used to understand issues and problems, the techniques and interventions utilized to address client issues, and the methods employed to evaluate effectiveness of interventions must all be grounded in our shared ethical standards.

Although it adds a complexity to the education of social workers, maintaining social work accreditation is important for students, particularly as most states will only license social workers who have graduated from a CSWE-accredited program. While licensing of social workers is done at the state level and not all jobs require a license, particularly at the BSW level (as some states don't offer licenses at that level), having a license does make social workers competitive on the job market. Not only is this important for their employability, but as educators, we also recognize the significant role we play in preparing students for practice. We often refer to social work as the helping profession. And, so if we are doing our job correctly, we are preparing the next generation of social workers to help others and to make a real difference in the lives of clients and communities in need.

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