The Generalist-Advanced Generalist Continuum

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Gibbs, Patty; Locke, Barry; and Lohmann, Roger A., "The Generalist-Advanced Generalist Continuum" (1990). Faculty Scholarship. 769.  
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With the adoption of the revised Curriculum Policy Statement (Commission on Accreditation, 1988), the Council on Social Work Education acknowledged the possibility of having the "advanced generalist" as one possible area of specialty in graduate social work education. It is important to note, however, that "advanced generalist" is but one of CSWE's five possible frameworks for organizing the advanced curriculum.

In the case of our program at West Virginia University, the advanced generalist approach has been determined to be the preferred option of a majority of the faculty over nearly two decades and three accreditation site visits. This has been true for both historical and environmental reasons. A revitalized BSW program, out of which a curriculum development project arose in the 1970s, and movement toward an advanced generalist both emerged as movements away from a highly methods oriented, clinical graduate program in the 1950s and 1960s, which was determined to be insufficiently sensitive to the rural and small town context of the Appalachian region. We have found the generalist-advanced generalist continuum to be the most viable of the available approaches to constructing both programs. Even so, agreement on what is meant by "generalist" and "advanced generalist" practice and education remains somewhat problematic.

This paper explores the concept of generalist-advanced generalist in practice and in education by discussing some of the tenets of generalist practice, advancing a paradigm for framing the BSW/MSW educational continuum, and presenting one possible curriculum design--including practice outcomes, course content and sequencing issues--to articulate an educational continuum in schools of social work that offer both the BSW and MSW degrees. Further, this paper argues that a curriculum that is designed to promote generalist practice is supportive of a particular arena of social work, namely practice in small towns and rural areas, as well as for social work practice at the entry level and advanced levels generally.

Background

Two events in the history of baccalaureate social work education profoundly impacted the nature of social work education: the recognition of the BSW as an entry-level degree by the National Association of Social Workers in 1969 and CSWE's initiation of accreditation standards for BSW programs in 1974. In
abandoning the one-degree and one-level-of-practice concepts, a longstanding, irreconcilable diversity and controversy in articulation of an educational continuum was precipitated. More recently, stemming from CSWE's adoption of the revised Curriculum Policy Statement, came the challenge of conceptualizing the continuum in terms of generalist/advanced generalist education and practice.

The intervening years since baccalaureate social work programs gained accredited status have been fruitful in attaining a good deal of consistency in content and outcomes among BSW programs (Federico, 1988). Although geographic region, religious orientation of the host academic institution, or concentrations of special populations in a locale are some of the factors that provide the impetus for individual program uniqueness, BSW programs share a common purpose that has framed a curriculum for entry-level education which is fairly consistent from program to program.

Graduate social work education, on the other hand, has never really enjoyed the same degree of consistency of content and outcomes across programs and curricula (Kolevzon, 1977). Although specialization (characterized as a concentration of specialized knowledge and practice skills built on the liberal arts perspective and professional foundation content) has historically been the overriding goal of advanced social work education (Kolevzon, 1984), frameworks for developing MSW curricula have been multiple and varied. With the recent acceptance of the advanced generalist as one possible concentration at the master's level, new possibilities exist for achieving some agreement on MSW curricula and the BSW/MSW educational continuum among those programs subscribing to an advanced generalist approach. Such agreement would serve not only to strengthen a more consistent conceptualization of advanced social work education but also, concomitantly, to launch a viable and stable continuum of professional education as it is linked to its generalist base.

**Generalist Practice**

The generalist model of practice has two central features. It is problem-solving centered, rather than methods driven, and it utilizes the person-in-environment configuration for assessment and intervention, giving practice a holistic emphasis rather than an elementary one. This perspective on generalist practice demands not only a view of individual social functioning that includes both individual factors and a host of environmental factors but also a focus on the transactions between the individual and the environmental factors. Individual social functioning, therefore, is viewed as the result of the person's individual characteristics (biological, psychological, and socio-structural [such as religion, class, sexual orientation]) in interaction with all elements in his/her environment, such as other individuals, institutions, groups, organizations, and so on. These
interactions may create risk (present obstacles) for the individual and/or bring opportunity (provide resources), both of which ultimately impact life choices and life chances, and both of which become considerations in framing an effective intervention plan.

It is within this paradigm that the generalist's efforts are focused, and these efforts hinge on an understanding of the individual and the whole interactional system, which includes its demands, its supports, and its interrelationships. In sum, the locus of the problem or need with which the generalist works is within the gestalt of the person/situation/environment experience, and it must therefore be responded to in that context.

The ethical base of social work commits to a stance that people should have equal access to resources, services, and opportunities for the accomplishment of life tasks and goals. Yet within society certain groups, based on common characteristics (e.g., race, age, gender, sexual orientation, rural residence) are categorically denied equal access to resources, services, and opportunities due to institutional patterns of discrimination against those special or minority populations. In such situations, the generalist orientation allows the social worker to respond not only to an immediate problem of the individual, such as job training, but also to the conditions in the community and society that present barriers to, for example, employment of minorities. Thus, the generalist social worker might work with the individual to meet individual needs while at the same time working with other agencies, organizations, institutions, or the community to alter conditions that created obstacles for that individual, which in turn ultimately benefits a larger group of people who may not have even identified themselves as clients seeking intervention.

The generalist orientation is particularly valued because it lacks assumptions about problem cause or location and allows interventions to be shaped by holistic assessment, rather than driven by predetermined methods. Holistic assessment not only considers but also makes use of the social context when formulating interventions. Because the model is inclusive rather than exclusive, thereby giving full consideration to the distinctive features of the client population, the social and physical environment, and the service delivery system, the potential to improve social functioning is maximized.

The crux of generalist practice—whether entry-level or advanced—is twofold; it involves not only the way a generalist views a situation (the gestalt of the person/situation/environment) but also how the situation is responded to (intervention at potentially several different levels while assuming any number of roles).

**Roles of a Generalist Practitioner: BSW and MSW**
The BSW level of social work education, by accreditation standards, is expected to prepare social workers for entry level generalist practice. The MSW level of social work education is also supposed to prepare social workers for entry level practice, at an advanced level, although the explicit meaning of advanced knowledge and skill in the context of holistic problem solving still requires clarification. While this set of expectations can at times appear confusing, if not DSM III certifiable, we think it important for the social work profession to continue its efforts, we hope with greater support, to clarify this educational continuum in a way that meets with the support of the practice community, as well as the accrediting mechanism. Too many BSW students are applying for MSW education, at least at WVU, because they feel they cannot be employed within the social work profession, which causes us to assume that the BSW level social worker has not been acceptably integrated into legitimate practice roles.

Because of the breadth of intervention possibilities generated by the generalist model of practice, the use of a wide range of helping roles is necessary. At both the BSW and MSW levels any combination of the following roles can be appropriate, given the problem definition and the client's input during the problem-solving process. The broker links people with programs or services through a process of careful assessment. The advocate presents and argues for services for a single client who otherwise would be rejected, as well as fights to modify rules, regulations, or laws on behalf of a class or group of clients who might normally be discriminated against. The evaluator carefully collects and evaluates data to assess client or community need in order to formulate a plan of intervention. The outreach worker actively reaches into the community to identify people who need services and to help them get their needs met. The teacher provides people with information/knowledge or teaches skills that will improve their ability to more effectively meet their needs. The behavior changer helps people to alter specific behavior patterns that are interfering with need meeting. The consultant provides training or technical information to other agencies or helpers to improve their abilities to offer services to people. The caregiver provides people with a wide range of supportive services, such as supportive counseling in times of loss and grief. The data manager collects, analyzes, and synthesizes a wide variety of information for making decisions and taking action; data collection ranges from simple data gathering, through preparing statistical reports of programs, to evaluation and research, such as single-subject designs to assess practice effectiveness. The administrator carries out activities associated with planning, directing, and carrying out a program or service and its policies. The enabler assists people to find the strengths and resources within themselves to produce whatever changes may be needed.

2 The standard generalist roles elaborated in this paper were adapted from Teare, R. & McPheeters, H. (June 1970). Manpower utilization in social welfare. Atlanta, GA: Southern Education Board.
necessary to accomplish life tasks and goals. The mediator acts to reconcile differences and to intervene on behalf of conflicting parties to promote reconciliation, settlement, or compromise. The community planner assists in planning with neighborhood groups, agencies, community agents, or governments in the development of community programs that meet the human service needs of the community.

In the generalist model of the social work educational continuum, graduate professional practice is defined less by the unique roles performed by MSW's than by expectations of greater depth and breadth of performance—often in higher level positions—and the capacity for independent practice (O'Connor, 1988). Advocacy by graduate practitioners is more likely to result in testimony in courts and hearings and in community organization/community development efforts. Evaluation may take the form of design and implementation of monitoring systems or evaluation studies. Teaching may involve organization or presentation of workshops and classes. Advanced generalist practitioners are capable of independent clinical practice involving behavior change, outreach, caregiving and mediation, although those interested in certain practice specialties may need to seek additional postgraduate training in their specialty. Graduate level data managers may design and implement computer systems in agencies. Administrators and supervisors may control and direct agencies and programs and community planners may design and carry out major community planning endeavors.

Summary

In sum, BSW and MSW generalist practice assumes a strong emphasis on the problem-solving model, the use of various helping roles, the person-in-situation configuration, and the ability to intervene at multiple levels (i.e., individual, groups, community, organization). In addition, the generalist orientation requires a solid background in the biological and social sciences and a commitment to social justice. Building upon this foundation, the MSW acquires advanced knowledge and skill via advanced professional foundation courses and a concentration of advanced knowledge in an area of interest to the student, chosen from a wide range of specific concentration courses offered in the curriculum.

While the MSW Advanced Generalist may be better prepared educationally to hold higher level positions than the BSW and to function more independently in specific fields of practice, graduate practitioners should be expected to continue to view problems and needs within the same holistic gestalt as that emphasized in BSW education.

Social Context: Definer of the West Virginia University Curriculum
Since the late 1960s, the School of Social Work at West Virginia University has been known for its leadership in preparing students for practice in small towns and rural areas, with special attention to the Appalachian region. This emphasis continues to be an important definer of the School's mission and, therefore, its curriculum. However, as faculty studied issues in this arena over time, the conceptualization of practice in small towns and rural areas was further refined. The emergent view of rural and small town practice is best characterized by the phrase "social context of practice." We are of the opinion that what is in fact unique about generalist social work practice in small towns and rural areas is the result of the continuing necessity of practitioners in those areas to respond to the unique social context within which practice takes place, although it is also obvious that this uniqueness is shared with social work practice in a range of geographic, social, and political settings.

The important implications of the social context as one engages in the practice of social work are that the social worker is prepared to learn about and deal appropriately with the endemic psychological, socio-cultural, and political environments that impact upon and interact with the client being served. Particularly important features of small towns and rural areas are the often extreme human and financial resource limits, absence of a broad range of distinctively urban social institutions, and the patterns of social interaction and relationship unique to rural areas. In essence, it is the social context of rural areas and small towns that requires a practitioner who is able both to intervene at any level (Irey, 1980) and to assume a variety of generalist practice roles.

While the generalist orientation seems particularly well-suited to rural and small-town settings (Irey, 1980; Martinez-Brawley, 1985), particularly in Appalachia, experience has shown that many of the insights of this approach can also be usefully applied to practice in inner city and international contexts as well. For example, the School of Social Work at West Virginia University has been admitting an ever larger number of international students, especially from the Pacific Rim nations, and our experience suggests that the emphasis on the social context of social work practice has enabled the international students to graduate from our curriculum prepared to return to their country of origin and work creatively and effectively.

Paradigm for the Generalist/Advanced Generalist Continuum

In the educational continuum, the advanced generalist subsumes the generalist as its foundation, and adds to it by allowing the MSW student to target an area of concentration and to acquire specialized research skills to contribute to the knowledge of the profession. The relationship between the generalist curriculum at the BSW level and the advanced generalist curriculum at the MSW level work together to define our implementation of the educational continuum. Figure 1, on
the following page, shows the hierarchical and parallel relationships along the BSW/MSW continuum. These relationships include 1) foundation knowledge in the liberal arts, 2) the base of cognates offered in BSW programs and other undergraduate majors, 3) the BSW professional core and counterpart MSW orientation courses, and 4) advanced generalist skills and knowledge acquired in the MSW foundations of practice, policy, human behavior, research, and field instruction, as well as in an area of concentration.

**Level One**

Level One encompasses the liberal arts foundation. BSWs and all MSWs, whether advanced standing or regular, must acquire a foundation in the liberal arts. Broad, liberally-based education remains a fundamental assumption of professional social work practice at all levels. The broad outlook, tolerant attitude, critical thinking and inquiry skills most closely associated with liberal education remain important fundamentals upon which to base social work practice knowledge and skills, and all students must have a liberal arts base, regardless of their level of entry into the social work educational continuum.

**Level Two**

Level Two shows the parallel relationships between the base of knowledge offered in the BSW program (the cognates from the biological, social, behavioral, and political sciences) and the acquired via the BA or BS degree by the student prior to entering the two-year MSW program. While it is a foregone conclusion that not all undergraduate majors who enter MSW programs are equally compatible relative to the cognate foundations they bring to their MSW studies, our approach at WVU is to assume at least partial equity. However, students with glaring content omissions in the professional cognate areas, e.g., human physiology, must address such gaps as a condition of admissions to the MSW program.

The cognates from the biological, social, behavioral, and political sciences support the professional foundations of HBSE, SWPS, practice, and research by providing the knowledge base upon which the foundations can build. Through the cognates students in most baccalaureate programs generally learn about families, political processes, social problems, psychological and sociological concepts, and normative human development—both ontogenetic and ecological.

**Level Three**

In a curriculum model fully consistent with the NASW practice continuum, all graduate social work students would complete an undergraduate major in social work prior to entry into graduate study. In general, however, most graduate programs which have considered this option have rejected it as infeasible for several reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper to explore further. Given the current
reality of non-BSWs entering MSW programs, the problem of spelling out some articulation between incoming BSW students and students with undergraduate degrees in some other field continues. The issue is, quite simply, what are the educational assumptions that guide advanced standing (Level Four) vs. those that guide the regular MSW program (which begins in Level Three)? Our approach has been to use a suite of introductory courses during the first year of study for MSW students with undergraduate majors other than social work. Level Three shows the parallel relationship between the BSW professional "core" or foundation courses and the MSW generalist orientation courses in HBSE, SWPS, social work practice, and research--which, in both the BSW and MSW programs, builds the generalist base as described thus far.

The thrust of the BSW professional core and MSW orientation courses is to prepare students for the advanced curriculum by building a base of knowledge, values, and skills around generalist roles, holistic problem-solving for intervention at multiple levels, the various methods needed to intervene at multiple levels, effective communication, ethical commitment, professional socialization, human diversity, social justice, human development, organizational dynamics, change processes, social welfare policy, and theories of practice and of human behavior.

**Level Four**

**The Advanced Generalist Curriculum: Inherent Problems**

At WVU we are attempting to develop a curriculum model that more fully articulates the professional roles for both BSW and MSW social workers and specifies, admittedly not with desired clarity, the educational goals, content, and outcomes that will better fit the needs of the professional practice community within the state and region served by the University. This has meant giving emphasis to preparing social workers for practice in rural areas and small towns. This mission, which we see as an important articulation of the Land-grant status of the institution, leads us to the generalist orientation to social work practice, at both educational levels.

At the MSW level, a generalist orientation creates considerable curricular difficulty given the traditional pressures of both the practice community and accrediting bodies for advanced education to be specialized. One of the authors was recently reminded of this potential dilemma at a meeting of professionals interested in better services for rural families when the a significant federal official noted that, without a doubt, rural professionals needed to be generalists but that one major barrier to this training was the accrediting process in most health professions. She
did note, however, that social work seemed the most flexible profession on this question. Even so, the social work profession itself has problems fully supporting the concept of advanced generalist practice as a graduate specialization.

Our views of the risks associated with adopting the advanced generalist option at the graduate level is particularly concerned with lack of agreement and clarity about what is meant by that practice model. Without agreement in either the profession or social work education, those programs that attempt to articulate the advanced generalist and seek accreditation may find themselves having to defend concepts that are lacking in professional sanction, which consequently could make defense of program accreditation more difficult, or even doomed. Although this is only an impression, we sense that it is a common one among those graduate programs that are attempting to educate for advanced generalist practice. Our MSW program, in response to these concerns, decided to avoid use of the explicit language "advanced generalist" in our recently prepared accreditation materials, even though our particular consensus over that concept informs the entire curriculum design. Although we did this deliberately to guard against jeopardizing reaffirmation, we remain committed to developing the advanced generalist concept and testing it out with the practice and education communities, a commitment that led us to participation in this Symposium to join the dialogue on the advanced generalist question. To this end, we present the following curriculum design as one possible model for educating the advanced generalist.

An Advanced Generalist Curriculum Model

The curriculum model we are presenting for the MSW program is designed to build on the concept of the BSW generalist previously described. This foundation serves as the jumping off point for the entire advanced generalist curriculum, which is organized around the Professional Foundation Areas—Human Behavior and the Social Environment, Social Welfare Policy and Services, Research, and Social Work Practice—and a concentration of advanced generalist course work as described later in this section. Several assumptions guide the advanced generalist curriculum and packaging of course offerings, as follows:

1. MSW practice, if it is indeed advanced, has to provide depth in learning opportunities around the selected advanced curriculum focus.
2. Advanced social work practice with a generalist orientation differs from specialized practice in that it requires the social worker to use the advanced curriculum content with multiple intervention levels.

3. Advanced social work practice with a generalist orientation requires the problem or need to be located in the gestalt of the person/situation/environment experience and be responded to in that context.

4. Advanced social work practice with a generalist orientation is a logical extension of the argument in favor of the generalist orientation as the preferred practice approach to serve rural areas and small towns.

5. Advanced social work practice with a generalist orientation requires the professional social worker to commit to a process of life-long learning, therefore, self-critical ability and knowledge seeking skills are prized behaviors.

Using the assumptions stated above, a curriculum to support advanced generalist social work practice can be developed that attends to both the professional foundation and advanced curriculum expectations of the accreditation standards, and which should be supported by the practice community, especially in rural areas.

Using the MSW program at WVU as a guide for the way credit hours required for the MSW degree may be limited, the model curriculum design requires 56 credits for regular students and 41 credits for advanced standing students (those admitted with the accredited BSW degree and meeting other admissions criteria for advanced standing).

**Generalist orientation.** The difference of 15 credit hours between the regular program and the advanced standing program is an important one. While it represents a pragmatic compromise, we think it also supports a key assumption of an advanced generalist curriculum design, namely that advanced generalist practice requires the generalist orientation to practice that is normally gained by BSWs who enter MSW programs. However, because the social work profession and CSWE support two entry levels to the profession, which allows students without the BSW credential to enter MSW study, the generalist orientation must be acquired prior to entry into the Advanced Generalist curriculum.

In order for non-BSW students and those BSWs with average undergraduate academic records to acquire a firm generalist orientation, the model MSW curriculum requires a minimum of three generalist orientation courses and extra time in field instruction. The three generalist orientation courses include one course in each of the professional foundation sequence areas of Human Behavior and the Social Environment, Social Welfare Policy and Services, and Social Work Practice. These courses, roughly the equivalent of the BSW professional core, serve to bring all students to the same conceptual playing surface, upon which the remainder of the curriculum articulated within this model builds (cf. Sherwood, 1980).
**Advanced generalist curriculum.** Consistent with accreditation standards, the professional foundation in the Advanced Generalist curriculum addresses content to support the four major sequences of HBSE, SWPS, Research, and Social Work Practice. While different requirements in the foundation sequence areas are certainly possible, depending on the view of a specific faculty group, we see as the minimum—one graduate level course in social policy analysis, one in human behavior in the community/organizational context, two courses in research, and two in social work practice. These requirements comprise the professional foundation that supports the advanced curriculum and, ultimately, advanced social work practice with a generalist orientation (advanced generalist, if you will).

In this particular model, the advanced curriculum content is defined as the careful selection of three additional advanced level courses and the field internship. The social policy analysis course and the community/organizational human behavioral courses are recommended because they flesh out the social and physical environment pieces of the person/situation/environment gestalt, which is particularly appropriate for social work practice in small towns and rural areas, and we suspect urban areas as well. The two research courses are recommended because of the continuing needs of the social work profession to seriously investigate and evaluate our knowledge base and service programs. In WVU's curriculum, these research courses emphasize both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as applied research tasks in social work practice at any level of intervention. Finally, in the social work practice sequence, two advanced practice courses are recommended, one of which focuses on the delivery of services (content on individual, family, community interventions) and the other of which focuses on activities that support service delivery (content on planning, managing, developing programs and services). The design of these courses provides advanced theoretical content to support the breadth of practice associated with the generalist orientation. They would not, however, provide specialized depth, which is instead the domain of the advanced curriculum.

The advanced curriculum for generalist practice builds upon the professional foundation in a way that supports advanced generalist practice. Our model for the advanced curriculum is addressed through the combined use of the remaining frameworks outlined in the CSWE Curriculum Policy Statement. In addition to the overarching Advanced Generalist framework, other organizing frameworks include Fields of Practice, Problem Areas, and Population Groups. We would hasten to add that these latter three frameworks seem compatible with the assumptions of the generalist orientation to practice, especially with the idea of using a problem-solving model across levels of intervention in order to target interventive efforts most appropriately within the person/situation/environment context. We made this choice for organizing our model curriculum because these frameworks appear to articulate the social work profession's tradition of taking action to address, in whole or in part, social problems and needs within society.
The specific requirements for the advanced curriculum include a minimum of three courses and the required field internship. Ideally, the curriculum for an advanced generalist concentration is organized around practice tracks or themes drawn from the organizing frameworks identified earlier in this paper. Such "tracks," depending on faculty talents, needs of consumers, and the social work practice community needs, might include social work practice with rural families, social work practice in rural health and long-term care, social work practice with rural community mental health, social work practice with substance abuse, etc. The tracks would only be limited by the interests, resources, and needs of the social work profession as seen through the mission of the institution.

Consistent with problem-solving concepts, the practice tracks should be flexible and responsive to the ever changing needs of society and the social work profession. Therefore, faculty would need to regularly review the content offerings for relevance and attempt to have a sufficiently diverse mix so that students might pursue legitimate career interests within the program's mission. This latter task is difficult for small to moderately sized programs; however, we think it is achievable with careful course construction. For instance, some courses may be able to serve more than one track within the MSW curriculum. Additionally, it may be possible with the judicious use of self-directed study, for students to develop practice knowledge in those areas not formally defined as curriculum tracks. It is highly contraindicated that all three of the advanced curriculum courses be completed as self-directed study, but one course may certainly be appropriate, with faculty guidance.

To complete the advanced curriculum requirements, each student completes a field placement allied to the chosen practice track. While any number of approaches to structuring the field placement are appropriate, a block model of varying length is used at WVU. In our program, students admitted to the regular MSW program must complete a six-month placement, and students admitted to the advanced standing MSW program must complete a four-month, one academic semester, placement.

The placement plays a very important role in supporting the preparation of advanced social work practitioners with a generalist orientation. Learning tasks and responsibilities are defined in a learning contract drawn up by the student, field instructor, and graduate faculty consultant. These tasks are expected to be multifocused and supportive in assisting the student in experiencing a range of direct service activities and a range of activities that support service delivery. This contract becomes an important means to achieve the generalist orientation necessary to help the student be prepared to practice in a manner that reflects the mission of the school to serve rural areas. We feel that this orientation may also better serve the interests of disadvantaged and oppression peoples regardless of geography—therefore, it may be most appropriate for any graduate social work program.
Discussion

Two questions frequently arise in discussions of advanced generalist practice: what is is a specialist, and how does it differ from an advanced generalist? Our position is that all social workers are advanced generalists under the following two conditions: first, if their assessment and intervention are based on the gestalt of the person/situation/environment and, second, if their interventive response to holistic assessments are potentially multi-level and multi-method. Metaphorically speaking, a hammer is not the only tool and a piece of wood is not the only medium when constructing a generalist intervention whereas the specialist would always choose a hammer and some wood. Given our distinction between advanced generalist and specialist, it follows that some practitioners who see themselves as specialists (e.g., health care workers) may actually be advanced generalists with a particular institutional emphasis (e.g., on health care).

This is where we find ourselves in thinking about the educational continuum associated with the generalist-advanced generalist debate. Obviously, several issues remain to be addressed, and we hope the dialogue will be facilitated by our observations. Some key, and for us unresolved, questions that remain include:

1. Should we continue to speak of an Advanced Generalist social worker, or are we better served to think about advanced social workers with a generalist orientation?
2. What is the best, if indeed there is one, framework for defining the advanced curriculum?
3. Is one year--basically this is what we have with advanced study--sufficient for preparing social workers at the advanced practice level?
References


