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Revolution by Evolution: The Needed Graduate Response To Undergraduate Social Work Education¹

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Abstract

This paper is an assessment of the state of the art of graduate social work curricula with particular reference to the lag of such curriculum in responding to the maturation of undergraduate social work education. Advanced standing programs, it is suggested, offer a purely administrative solution to the curriculum question posed by the new continuum of social work education. An ad hoc trial and error problem-solving strategy is called for, on the basis of four assumptions: the primary of the BSW curriculum; and the advanced, specialized and applied science character of graduate social work.

Introduction

The past two decades have been an era of doubt and critical self-examination for all of social work. While the late 1960s were a particularly excruciating time for social work practice, the impact of this self-criticism within the profession has fallen most heavily on social work education in the decade just past. And continuing dialogue and debate over the question of the relationship of undergraduate and graduate education has been one of the prominent themes in this self-examination process.

Various official bodies have been and are at work on this topic and I shall not even attempt to review their lengthy and at times tempestuous histories here. My concern here is with the state of the art of graduate curricula in social work and in particular with the responsiveness (or lack thereof) of graduate curricula to the emerging, and increasingly robust, phenomenon of undergraduate social work education and practice.

This paper is not written as an official position statement of any group or committee, but as the considered reflection of an individual graduate faculty member concerned with the insufficient attention being devoted to the critical question of the peaceful coexistence of undergraduate and graduate social work education. The views expressed here are entirely my own, based on two decades of experience at two different schools of social work. I am also a firm believer that the ultimate responsibility for defining curriculum rests with individual, independent faculties at various universities and colleges and not with administrators or accrediting bodies although each of these obviously has a role in defining minimal

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expectations and setting standards. My thesis is a simple one: The Emergence and continued growth of undergraduate social work education has brought an opportunity of staggering proportion to improve the traditional graduate curriculum. However as graduate educators we continue to do our best to ignore that opportunity or when that will not work, respond with minimal administrative solutions such as advanced standing programs which leave the traditional curriculum intact and merely abbreviate it for some students. In an age of shrinking support for human services and declining enrollments continuation of this pattern will surely lead to further deterioration of the integrity of graduate education, while adequate responses to this opportunity could move social work into a central position with the social sciences.

A Digression on Degree Progression

Before entering into this argument, however, I must share a recollection from my very first day of college which summarizes a key element of this question. Two decades ago I was one of the beanie-clad freshmen in the auditorium of a state college in the Midwest as the college President offered us some remarks on the degrees offered at our school: “Most of our graduates receive the B.S. degree,” he told us, and added, “and I assume that you all know what B.S. is.” I assure you, even in 1960 we did. “Then we offer the M.S. degree,” he continued, “which stands for More of the Same.” And finally, we offer the Ph.D., which means Piled Higher and Deeper.”

I am often reminded of this story in talking with recent BSWs who have decided to go on to graduate school. One of their most frequent laments is that graduate study to them appears to be merely “more of the same” as they got in their undergraduate coursework. Or, in some cases, not even more; Just the same. Like other graduate faculty my initial response to this was to ignore or discount it; after all, if they already knew the material they were studying in the graduate program, they certainly didn’t show it! But the more I’ve thought about the question the more troubled I’ve become by the apparently large overlaps existing in many programs between the BSW and the MSW curricula. While it is generally easy to “cherry pick” this fact or that theory and claim “Ah hah, but you don’t know this” the reality is that in altogether too many instances the students were exactly correct. Despite the NASW manpower statement with its clear progression of levels of practice; and despite the CSWE accreditation standards for both BSW and MSW programs, there has still been too little really satisfactory curriculum work done in most schools on this question of how the progression of levels of practice and translates into curriculum and sorting out the appropriate educational strategies for each level. The major exceptions to this all come from the baccalaureate level at this point (For example, see Baer & Federico, 1978).

At a minimum, we need three things: 1) Elaboration of an acceptable *hierarchy of practice knowledge and skill levels*; 2) A legitimate, acceptable common framework of the *rationales* for progressing from one degree level to the next; 3)

Further elaboration of the *unique rationales* for each degree in the continuum – from the associate to the baccalaureate, to the graduate and the doctoral duo – the academic Ph.D. and the practice-oriented DSW. While the respective NASW and CSWE pronouncements offer an important beginning point, the fact that they do not offer a completely satisfactory solution is evident at this and every other recent Annual Program Meeting as rumors abound of the to-ing and -fro-ing of this or that committee or commission over this issue.

As things presently stand the only real curriculum rationale for the BSW who goes on to graduate study is that noted by my college's president so many years ago: *they will get more of the same*. One of the clearest evidences of this is seen in the predominant graduate response to undergraduate education so far – the advanced standing program. A purely administrative solution, advanced standing programs assume a fixed exit point for all graduate social workers and merely shorten the time necessary for certain BSWs to get to that point. Advanced standing generally assumes the continued primacy of graduate education and offers no clear resolution of any of the three issues noted: no hierarchy; no rationale and no differentiation of the uniqueness of various levels. The only hierarchy implied is more of the same and the only rationale is abbreviation of graduate study. The critical issues addressed by advanced standing, therefore, are merely administrative. Th

The obvious difficulty of defining or identifying what it is at that level that all MSWs can or ought to be able to know and do when they graduate appears not to have been a major deterrent to this approach. Beyond that about the only response I have ever detected among my colleagues on this question is the continued lament about the “poor quality” of given BSW programs and students. Indeed, the most pervasive response to undergraduate social work education found among MSW teaching faculty has been to simply ignore it entirely! Yet, however, long and creatively we in graduate education choose to protest or ignore the undergraduate phenomenon the handwriting would appear to already be on the wall: The BSW is now officially recognized earliest entry point into the professional practice of social work and professional education ought to be fully responsive to that development, just as we presume to be responsive to other changes in the real world.

In particular graduate curricula must begin to reflect to a greater extent than they currently do that some students now learn their social work before they enter graduate school; and some of them learn it very well!. Continued reliance on Advanced Standing as the only response by graduate education will in the long run prove disastrous for graduate social work if only because so much of the graduate curriculum has already been reproduced at the undergraduate level. Cheap, repetitive master's degree programs have been operating in a number of other fields for some time and the results are not encouraging. The master's degree programs becomes operationally defined as a) what a young practitioner does with nights and weekends; and b) an avenue to salary increases (and little else). Given the traditional role of the MSW as the hallmark of professional status in social work, such an ignominious status devaluation would be little short of tragic, and

completely unavoidable. However continued defensiveness and protectionism against the BSW on the part of graduate faculty and deans would appear to be a sure-fire formula for producing just such a result! What is needed instead is some genuinely foresighted leadership in redefining graduate social work education in light of its new position.

How is this redefining process supposed to occur? The most promising approach at present would be to adopt an evolutionary, gradualist “trial and error” strategy which seems to move the field gradually away from the ad-hoc administrative solutions of advanced standing programs toward a “second generation” response which significantly redefines the graduate education knowledge base, establishes clear prerequisite expectations for all graduate students in social work, and at the same time escalates the outcome expectations for graduate level practitioners. Because of the nature of this problem, it is likely that the most effective problem solving strategy would be a school-by-school one, with CSWE standards gradually reflecting the changes rather than attempting to mandate or direct them.

And how can graduate social work education begin to move in this direction? The first and foremost step is for graduate curriculum committees to adopt a simple rule: *Whatever can reasonably be taught to undergraduate students should be.* Some graduate faculty have already been systematically underrating the learning capabilities of graduate social work students for years, and in the past few years that same set of limited expectations has simply been projected onto undergraduates. The real question here is not the ability of undergraduates but doubts about the integrity of social work education itself. We need to be clear in our own minds that however much undergraduates learn, there will still be knowledge, skills, information and techniques which they will find novel, rewarding and worthwhile to be taught at the graduate level. To fail to understand that is to seriously underestimate the knowledge base we have developed and might yet borrow from the main bodies of the social sciences and humanities, as well as miscalculate the nature of human investment in learning.

A more formalized way of stating this matter as a general curriculum principle is as follows: Graduate social work educators must recognize that we are no longer the final arbiters of what is and is not appropriate knowledge or inappropriate levels of practice skill and proficiency. That prerequisite was originally granted by the Council (CSWE) and has now been removed (or at least seriously modified) by that same council. The primary responsibility for defining the base of professional knowledge and skill in social work now rests at the BSW level, however much cosmetic and rhetorical camouflage is given to the concept of a “dual base” or “dual entry points” to the profession. For some this is a great loss; It can also be a golden opportunity. Who among MSW teachers has not chafed at the necessity for “basic” or introductory courses and wished instead for the opportunity to get into detailed, intensive class room activity in the areas of one’s real professional interests? This is that opportunity!

For if complete responsibility for the base of social work education can be shifted over a period of years to the undergraduate level and if through cooperation faculty development programs, accreditation, and just simple professional and programmatic maturation the quality of undergraduate programs continues to rise as it has in the past few years, a radically transformed graduate educational experience becomes possible. Furthermore, one need not foreclose the dual entry concept or necessarily preclude non-BSWs from such graduate experience. Creating systems of prerequisite courses in the areas of the BSW standards appears a highly workable alternative. (And let the non-BSW take “accelerated” courses to catch up!)

What then should emerge in the way of graduate curricular offerings? Three primary criteria appear to offer the framework around which to build new graduate programs. Such programs should be *advanced*, *specialized* and *applied science* in character. With the advent of the BSW as the base of professional practice knowledge and skill, we now have an operational way to define advanced education at the graduate level. Just as in the past advanced coursework and field experiences were introduced at the second year and based upon the first year of graduate work we should now be able to presume that all graduate work is “advanced” and built upon the BSW knowledge base. But how, one might ask, is one to determine such advanced knowledge?

The first part of the answer has already been provided: One need only ask is it provided at the BSW level? Unlike the MSW standards, which are quite open-ended and encompassing the BSW accreditation standards are fairly precise. (Compare the BSW and MSW accreditation standards on this point.) Perhaps more importantly there appears to be a fairly stable consensus among undergraduate educations as to what they mean. In addition there are also three criteria which one might use to separate basic from advanced perspectives: 1) *Prerequisite knowledge* that presumes as necessary prerequisites knowledge and skill stipulated in the BSW standards; 2) *Adult knowledge* which presumes higher levels of maturity or greater life experience in order to practice; and 3) *Emergent knowledge*, the understanding of which requires the synthesis of two or more perspectives ordinarily learned independently. Those who may be offended by the suggestion here that undergraduates are not fully mature are encouraged to read Harry Stack Sullivan’s comments on late adolescence in *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*.

Those graduate faculty who have taken the time to read the BSW standards have come away with a clearer appreciation of just how clearly they demarcate the social work knowledge base at that level. It is only a slight next step to use that base in the manner suggested immediately above. For example, the case for teaching an advanced topic like management information systems design at the graduate level ought to be grounded in more than the empirical observation that such systems are problematic for many agencies. The ultimate rationale for such coursework would be found in the information problems of the profession. Likewise, the suggestion that additional material is required for some topics is in no way a denigration of undergraduates. But there is life after 21 and presumably most of us

benefit from living it. It is often said that it takes a short time to get a social work degree but it takes years to become a good social worker. This criterion is intended to such that graduate education should recognize and participate in such maturational and experiential development. Finally, with emergent knowledge one can identify a host of additional topics, from family therapy to evaluative research, where maximum learning can be expected only after students have mastered two or three previous topics usually handled in separate introductory courses.

Graduate education that is more responsive to the BSW would also be specialized in nature. As the BSW is increasingly recognized as the professional threshold, the expectation that everyone needs an MSW becomes increasingly unrealistic. Graduate education should be reserved primarily for those who have mastered the basics and who want to develop a particular specialty in some area of practice.² Such specialties may be defined by problem area, mode of practice, client group or some other, similar basis but all graduate social workers should be offered a specialty in which they can develop intensive knowledge and well-above average skill. It must be noted that such a framework built upon the generalist base of the BSW is no more a rejection of generalist than is the kind of ad hoc, on the job, specialization, one finds throughout the human services today. It is merely an accommodation to the recognition that one simply cannot be expected to learn everything. Time is limited and choices must be made in education as in everything else. Some attention however needs to be devoted to the implications of specialized graduate programs for career development. Probably graduate programs ought to initially concentrate at least as much on how to acquire a specialty as upon the particular specialties developed, since the likelihood is great that most graduate practitioners will change specialties one or more times over the course of a career.

Finally, the changed circumstances of graduate curricula offer a great opportunity to reformulate the scientific base of professional knowledge on the original pragmatic grounds extolled by many early social workers. For example, Mary Richmond's *Social Diagnosis* (New York: Free Press, 1917) is in at least one sense a treatise on social science methodology. The term *science* appears consistently as a defining element in discussions of the profession but within the history of social work it has gone from a pragmatic concern with valid and reliable knowledge of an independent empirical world to the much narrower connotation of science used by the psychodynamic school to the positivist concern for enduring truths. In the process, social work has gone from aspiring to be an applied science, in the sense of the use of scientific procedures and techniques for solving practical problems to being merely a consumer of science – a great borrower of ideas, concepts and findings from the real or basic social sciences.

There are signs of a newfound rediscovery of the earlier sense of social workers as active participants in the knowledge they use and not mere consumers in the

² For a different perspective on this see Ralph Garber, Carol Meyer and Constance Williams, "Socialization in the Social Work Profession," Council on Social Work Education, 1979 (mimeo)

focus on accountability, as well as the continued search for better means of defining or diagnosing problems. The primary burden for incorporating these perspectives into practice should rest with the graduate programs to an even greater extent than they do today. The real benefit of science for social work is not to be found in those certified truths which some expect will eventually make professional judgement obsolete, but rather in the unique demanding form of community offered by science: The world of voluntary, self-disciplining communities whose members are bound together by their mutual interest in their topics, and by their mutual commitment toward acceptable procedures for testing the validity of their observations and assessing their evidence before reaching conclusions. This is not only a “white lab coat” vision of experiential laboratory science but also an activist, involved vision of the link point between democratic professional self-control and future improvement. One can find this vision of science as readily in the efforts of a group staff to become more accountable as in the conduct of experimental hypothesis testing research.

Among the social sciences social work is already in a unique position because of its integrative stance on two issues: the linkage of theory and practice; and the synthesis of findings from many separate specialty social scientific disciplines into a holistic view of humanity. With the kind of reoriented graduate curriculum discussed above, it is not at all difficult to see social work assuming an increasingly significant future role in the social sciences. But the burden of this synthesis – particularly the synthesis of theory and practice – will rest with the MSW programs. It is simply futile to talk about “practice doctorates” in the present age of scarcity. Most recent doctorates in social work seek careers in teach and research and there is no reason to expect that they will do otherwise at any time in the near future. The few who are exceptions should be treated as just that – rare and special exceptions to a general rule. To the extent that there will be knowledge synthesis in the next few decades, therefore, this will be a legitimate doctoral level concern. However, the unique scientific position of the MSW will increasingly become that of the true *applied scientist* who brings theory to practice and tests the results of practice, making necessary adjustments to practice as evidence suggests.

Conclusion

The growing legitimacy of the BSW as the base of professional social work practice has major – indeed, revolutionary – implications for graduate social work education. If as graduate educators we continue to do our best to ignore the whole BSW phenomenon or offer only weak administrative solutions such as advanced standing programs the MSW is destined to become just “more of the same” for BSW practitioners – repetitious coursework and redundant field experiences.

With the kinds of adjustments called for in this paper, the future could look very bright for graduate social work. During the past few decades of affluence and university expansion a great many new specialty master’s degree programs arose in competition to the MSW. However, one would expect that in an era of tight money and declining enrollments many of these same programs would simply not survive, while a revitalized graduate social work should have no difficulty with survival and

the MSW should become a renewed source of professional pride and excellence. Such a result would truly be revolutionary.