

The Scandal of Social Work Education

Introduction

The profession of social work was born of a desire to provide needful social services to those without means of recompense. There can hardly be a nobler calling. In pursuing it, social workers often find it necessary to shape their actions and advice in accord with their larger conceptions of the social good. Done in a manner consistent with law and agency policy there is nothing here that is problematic. Moreover, the dominant ideals of the social work profession will inevitably color these conceptions. To the extent, however, that social work looks to the university to provide professional training, importing its beliefs about the nature of the social good into the premises of academic programming, tensions between social work as a cause, and social work as a scholarly discipline, may well arise.

A school or department of social work *within* a university is bound to adhere to the basic principles of intellectual inquiry, including respect for evidence, open-mindedness about debatable questions, and intellectual autonomy for students and scholars. To be sure, universities allow some degree of latitude to faculty members whose scholarship shades into advocacy. No one doubts that scientists working on the Human Genome Project can, as citizens or fund raisers, promote the advantages that knowledge of the human genome will bring. We expect as well that those working on such issues as poverty, drug addiction, or crime will develop informed opinions about these matters, and that the university will support their right to advocate their individual scholarly opinions as well as to publish their findings of fact. And no one doubts that professors are free to make their opinions on issues within their fields known to their students.

And yet this openness to some forms of advocacy has its limits. In higher education, advocacy can sometimes be welcomed as a passenger, but has no right to take the wheel. That is because the university *must* be open to the full range of responsible intellectual disagreement. When advocacy occupies the driver's seat, it often jettisons contrary opinions and dissenting ideas. Advocacy's agenda replaces the search for the truest account.

Social work began without any expectation that its practitioners needed specialized education, let alone such as universities could provide. Nonetheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, short training programs began to be introduced under the sponsorship of casework agencies.¹ Shortly thereafter a trend toward affiliation with institutions of higher education developed, with degree programs appearing on the graduate as well as the undergraduate level.² Concomitantly, organized groups of social work practitioners and educators began to appear as instruments for better defining professional standards. In 1952, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), a single accrediting agency for all social work education programs, replaced two earlier, competing organizations. Three years later, seven social work membership and research organizations merged to form the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). NASW works to advance and unify the profession as a whole, promoting what it regards as sound policies and delineating ethical standards.³

Although social work always had a clear “progressive” orientation, the upsurge of political activism during the 1960s increased the NASW’s involvement in issues such as civil rights, a guaranteed income, birth control, and welfare rights. This trend was accentuated during the 1970s when, in response to perceived threats to social welfare programs from the Nixon, Ford, and Carter Administrations, the NASW stepped up its efforts to influence legislation through analysis and testimony.⁴ The election of Ronald Reagan gave the process a further boost, leading to the NASW’s creation in 1984 of a “national peace and disarmament network.”

In 1960, the NASW adopted its first code of ethics. A series of revisions and amendments followed during subsequent decades. In 1997 an entirely new code was adopted with a preamble that, for the first time, laid out a vision of social work’s mission and core values. This highlighted the NASW’s growing commitment to social justice and social change.⁵ Standard 6.01 of the new code of ethics made it clear that social workers were now obligated to promote social justice “from local to global levels,” very much including political action.

Use of the term “social justice” today generally equates with the advocacy of more egalitarian access to income through state-sponsored redistribution. The phrase is also frequently used to justify new entitlement rights for individuals and whole categories of people, i.e., legally enforceable claims of individuals or groups against the state itself. Here’s how one social work textbook, *Direct Social Work Practice: Theory and Skill* (now in its seventh edition) lays out in vivid detail what its authors believe pursuing social justice means in the context of contemporary American politics:

The objective of promoting social and economic justice merits a renewed commitment by social workers given the conservative trends of the past three decades. Providers of social services and their clientele have suffered major setbacks in recent years, as the United States has sought to cope with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the movement from a strong to a declining economy, the shift from budget surpluses to budget deficits, tax cuts geared toward the upper income tiers, and losses of domestic jobs to overseas workers. In an even earlier era, the radical restructuring of the government’s approaches to poverty of women and children in the form of pub. L. No. 104-193, the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996*, ‘ended welfare as we know it’. Specifically, work requirements for women were increased even though no guarantee of child care support was provided. In addition, educational assistance was decreased. In another blow, the specific circumstances of women who tend to work in the part-time, low-wage, low benefits services sector were not addressed. In essence, the law increased the accountability demanded from recipients of aid without requiring comparable accountability from state and federal governments regarding the types of employment attained and income levels of those women. Recognizing these discrepancies, social workers need to advocate for the welfare of low income families and children and monitor whether services and supports are actually sufficient to reduce poverty and improve the welfare of children.⁶

Even at a more abstract level social justice is a contentious concept. Some important and influential thinkers such as John Rawls⁷ have advanced social justice (in approximately this sense) as the *sine qua non* of liberal democracy. But other major and influential thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek⁸ and Robert Nozick⁹ have strongly disputed both its meaningfulness and desirability. This debate is, moreover, vibrantly alive in much of the academy.

This report takes no stand on the substance of these disputes. We merely wish to emphasize that NASW’s 1997 Standard 6.01 and similar statements are, in effect, partisan declarations within these

debates about policy. They take no notice of the existence of competing ideas, but grant a privileged status to a single, arguable view, which is thereby placed above critical examination. In that sense, NASW's emphasis on social justice, when applied to academic programming, runs counter to the spirit and the principles of good educational practice and normal scholarship.

During most of the twentieth century American academe enthusiastically embraced these principles and spirit. It was generally understood throughout the mainstream of American higher education that neither faculty nor students should be required to espouse particular views on social and political issues. As members of a community of thinkers and scholars they were free *as citizens* to adopt virtually whatever views they pleased, and *as scholars*, to adopt any view that could be reasonably supported by evidence and argument. But within the academy at large, intellectual issues were not supposed to be foreclosed by ideological preference, question begging, or professional fiat. Apart from certain matters at sectarian institutions touching upon theology, universities that tolerated programs in which only one point of view, or a narrowly restricted set of views, could be expressed, were not considered reputable.

This translated into norms of classroom practice. It was held to be axiomatic that a reputable university curriculum could not demand that students (or faculty members) affirm a point of view on matters of legitimate controversy or advocate particular public policies, either within the classroom setting, or in the broader public arena. We find this principle unmistakably implied by the cautionary words of the founding document of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), in its 1915 *Declaration of Principles*.

The teacher ought also to be especially on his guard against taking unfair advantage of the students' immaturity by indoctrinating him with the teacher's own opinions before the student has had an opportunity fairly to examine other opinions upon the matters of question, and before he has sufficient knowledge and ripeness in judgment to be entitled to form any definitive opinion of his own. It is not the least service which a college or university may render to those under its instruction, to habituate them to looking not only patiently but methodically on both sides, before adopting any conclusion upon controverted issues. [Link]

Here the professor is enjoined against indoctrinating vulnerable students in order to allow them to freely develop opinions of their own. By the time of the Second World War it came to be recognized that imposing an ideological litmus test is more than just unsound and unethical pedagogy, it also runs afoul of our most fundamental First Amendment freedoms. In a remarkable ruling during a period when the nation's flag aroused universal and passionate admiration, the Court defended the right of the schoolchildren of Jehovah's Witnesses to refuse to pledge allegiance to it. Writing for the Court, Justice Robert H. Jackson uttered these timeless words in 1943:

If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion, or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.¹⁰

The central principle of the Flag Salute case has since been reaffirmed, and it remains as valid today as it was when enunciated.¹¹ In general terms, the First Amendment prohibits government officials—and administrators and professors in public colleges and universities, whether they know it or not, surely fall in this category for constitutional purposes—from compelling beliefs or requiring their public affirmation.

Unfortunately, during the last few decades, American higher education has allowed these intellectual and juridical principles to be increasingly compromised. A number of disciplines in the humanities have taken on decidedly ideological colorations, and some new fields such as women's studies and various branches of ethnic studies have come to see themselves as extensions of external social and political movements. Even university mission statements and extracurricular programming have begun to reflect a strong orientation toward social change, epitomized in the avid embrace of the concept of "diversity", in many ways a repudiation of traditional American ideals of individualism and the melting pot. The earlier commitment to intellectual neutrality and an open marketplace of ideas has often been subverted by this trend. And, not surprisingly, this has led to numerous collisions between university policies and the individual speech, association, and conscience rights of students and faculty members who dissent, in one way or another, from approved outlooks.

In a very real sense then, social work, as it evolved as a profession, and the American academy have been moving along parallel tracks—the chief difference being that, in the case of social work, the movement has seen an intensification of political and moral commitments that already imbued the profession, while in academe recent developments go against what were earlier considered to be foundational precepts.

How far has the trend toward advocacy in social work *education* gone? Has it, abetted by academe's own enlarged tolerance for advocacy, increasingly reflected the strong commitment to doctrine in the profession as a whole? Or, as an independent educational and research pursuit, has the field managed to largely stay on course? These are especially important questions given the pervasive influence of the social work profession in the public realm, both in the counseling of clients and the formulation of policy. Are social workers educated to see the problems they grapple with from a variety of facets, or only along the contours of a narrow ideological line?

On the basis of numerous anecdotes and fragments of evidence it began to appear increasingly likely that even within the ideologically colored environment of the contemporary university, social work education constituted an especially advanced case of politicization, in which dogma, tendentiousness, and coerced intellectual conformity were becoming integral to the definition of the field. We were especially alarmed by accounts reaching us of students in social work education programs who had had their consciences unconscionably coerced. We also learned that the discipline's accrediting body, the CSWE, had among its protocols language about affirming "social justice ideals," which seemed to us to raise serious First Amendment issues, when applied to programs at public universities. (We've brought these issues before the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which employs CSWE accreditation as a gatekeeper when hiring social workers, and intend to bring them before state and local government agencies as well.)

It therefore seemed to us that the subject of social work education's politicization was worthy of more comprehensive and detailed review. To be sure, social work education is considered by some to be among the university's poorer academic cousins—a cash cow, perhaps, but not a field of even modest intellectual cachet. Nonetheless, as a university program it represents a test case in what the larger academic community is willing to tolerate, and hence a telling indicator of the academy's de facto fidelity to its principles. With these considerations in mind, we decided to conduct a study of social work education programs that examined (1) the accreditation standards to which they conformed, (2) the professional standards they expected of their students, (3) the way they defined themselves and their programmatic objectives in their mission statements, and (4) their course

listings described course content.

In order not to be accused of either “cherry picking” the programs we studied, or of selecting unimportant programs, we reviewed the webpages of social work education programs at public universities ranked according to those universities’ overall enrollment. Beginning with the public universities that had the largest enrollments and working downward in size, we chose the first ten social work education programs we came across that, during the spring semester of 2007, had posted on their webpages all the information we required, that is to say, accreditation information, standards used in student assessment, mission statements, and course descriptions. The social work education programs thus chosen were those at Arizona State University/Tempe, University of California/Berkeley, University of California/Los Angeles, the University of Central Florida, the University of Houston, the University of Michigan, the University of Minnesota/Twin Cities, the University of Texas/Austin, the University of Washington, and Wayne State University.¹²

Findings

As will be shown, the major social work education programs we examined, whether measured by the official statements of those who accredit them, those who administer them, and those who teach in them, have lost sight of the difference between instruction and indoctrination to a scandalous extent. They have, for the most part, adopted an official ideological line, closing off debate on many questions that serious students of public policy would admit to be open to the play of contending viewpoints. Moreover, these programs see themselves as training not just case workers, but advocates for a particular set of policy-relevant perspectives in public debate. In a number of cases, failure on the part of students to advocate the correct line has led to lowered grades or even the threatened denial of a diploma.

1. CSWE Accreditation Standards

The demand for ideological commitment and political advocacy suffuses the social work educational structure from the top down. The CSWE, the national accreditor of social work education programs, considers preparation for political advocacy an essential component of professional training, its *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* declaring that one of the purposes of social work is: “To pursue policies, services, and resources *through advocacy and social or political actions* [italics added] that promote social and economic justice.”¹³ Thus, preparation for social and political advocacy and activism, not just in some general sense, but for a particular set of ends, is, in the eyes of the CSWE, part of a social worker’s job definition. It follows that, as conceived by the CSWE, teaching or training for ideologically partisan political advocacy is a legitimate component of the social work curriculum, if not an outright duty of social work education programs.

Moreover, the same document tells us that graduates of social work education programs are expected to demonstrate the ability to: “Understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and apply strategies of advocacy and social change that advance social and economic justice.”¹⁴ And also that “programs integrate social and economic justice content grounded in an understanding of distributive justice, human and civil rights, and the global interconnections of

oppression”; and that “programs provide content related to implementing strategies to combat discrimination, oppression, and economic deprivation and to promote social and economic justice,” and “prepare students to advocate for nondiscriminatory social and economic systems.”¹⁵

Note several things about these formulations.

First, the use of the term “oppression”. “Oppression” is an unusually strong term, especially in the context of a professional mission aimed, for the most part, at preparing practitioners working with disadvantaged people and groups in the United States. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines “to oppress” in its political sense as “to keep down by the cruel or unjust use of power or authority; to burden with harsh rigorous impositions; to tyrannize over,” and defines “oppression” as “the imposition of unreasonable burdens, either in taxes or services, excessively rigorous government; severity.”

Second, the phrase “forms and mechanisms” conveys not something just occasional, but practices that are systematic, entrenched, institutionalized, and widespread.

Third, the formulation “global interconnectedness of oppression” strongly hints at a rather specific theoretical take on the nature of “oppression”, one that sees its local manifestations as part of an integrated system of exploitation explainable in terms of some worldwide dynamic. To see the American social landscape as being pervaded by globally interconnected oppression is to partake of an ideological sensibility from which many reasonable people would surely demure. Yet for the CSWE these appear to be foundational assumptions for social justice education.

Fourth, the study of social and economic justice is to be grounded in an “understanding of distributive justice.” “Distributive justice” is a normative principle, the legitimacy of which divides thinkers. For example, advocates of libertarian principles generally argue that “distributive principles conflict with more moral demands such as those of liberty or respecting self-ownership.”¹⁶ Shouldn’t students of social work education be encouraged to examine how classically liberal or libertarian principles and approaches, among others, might be applied to the solution of social work? Yet the CSWE would appear to regard such possibilities as closed.

Fifth, the programs are to prepare students to advocate non-discriminatory social and economic systems. Putting aside exactly what the term ‘non-discriminatory’ here means (is it simply an endorsement of meritocracy or something far more sweeping?), it is hard to imagine programs preparing students for advocacy of a specific stripe without becoming themselves a form of advocacy.¹⁷

No college or university, and most certainly not public ones, can properly demand that a student publicly affirm a particular ideological or political position, much less engage in overt advocacy on its behalf. But this is precisely what the CSWE accreditation guidelines set themselves up to enforce within social work education. An instructor who requires that students publicly endorse his pet wealth distribution scheme, or his favorite race-preference policies, can thus find support in CSWE guidelines. Even more than that, he could actually argue that his duty demands he require his students learn to “apply strategies of advocacy and social change that advance social and economic justice,” because the accreditation of his program depends upon it.

2. *Adherence to the NASW Code of Ethics*

The CSWE's accreditation guidelines are not alone in being ideologically loaded and mandating political advocacy and action. This same requirement is contained in the *Code of Ethics* of the NASW.[Link] For example, its Preamble, states that:

Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. These activities may be in the form of direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation.

Later in the Code, the Second Ethical Principle, under the heading of the value "Social Justice," expounds on the Ethical Principle, "Social Workers Challenge Social Injustice" as follows:

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to a knowledge about oppression and cultural, economic and ethnic diversity.

Section 6 of the ethical standards addresses "social workers' ethical responsibilities to the broader society." Section 6.04, entitled "Social and Political Action," contains similar injunctions:

(a) Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice. . . .

(c) Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally. Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people.

Thus, the NASW *Code of Ethics* reinforces the CSWE guidelines by endorsing not only social and political advocacy as part of the social worker's role, but also social and political activism directed at policy and legislative change. Moreover, this advocacy and activism are to be put to the service of a sweeping non-judgmentalism that a great many would reject, not only as a statement of personal philosophy, but as a basis for personal counseling, social intervention, and public policy. Should cultural and social diversity be affirmed *ipso facto*? Should "difference" necessarily be respected? Are these non-debatable assumptions of social work, whose acceptance is literally a matter of professional ethics? If they are, does the scholarly study of social work constitute a body of open and evolving knowledge leading to rational praxis, or a set of doctrinal prescriptions demanding reflexive fidelity? These are not abstract queries. Nine of the ten programs we examined required

student endorsement of the NASW *Code of Ethics* as a condition of successful completion of a degree in social work.

Arizona State University/Tempe: The *Field Education Manual* requires that students "demonstrate compliance with the NASW Code of Ethics" as a basis for full credit.

As derived from the curriculum content, the focus of the undergraduate field placement is on the establishment of professional identity including integration of professional values and ethics, relationship building skills, strategies of empowerment practice, promotion of social and economic justice, the context of the agency and community, and awareness and responsiveness to the diversity of peoples of the Southwest.

And under the "Expectation" column opposite "Professional Values and Ethics" resides a specific requirement for adherence to the NASW Code of Ethics:

The student will identify, in practice situations, major values that both support and challenge his/her personal and professional practice of social work. The student will demonstrate compliance with the NASW Code of Ethics. [Link]

University of California at Berkeley: The Student Handbook indicates that "suitability for the profession" requires behavior specifically consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics. From page 30 of the *MSW Handbook*, under the heading "Ethical Standards and Student Conduct":

Violations of the School's ethical standards will result in disciplinary action.

Two areas of student conduct, therefore, are of primary importance—professional and academic.

Proper *professional* conduct requires students to behave in a manner consistent with the ethical principles and standards of the social work profession, as formalized in the NASW Code of Ethics. Students enrolled in Berkeley's MSW program are required to demonstrate their suitability for the profession and their commitment to the profession's core values of service, social justice, honesty, and competence. [Link]

University of California/Los Angeles: Currently does not have a condition available online that specifically mentions the NASW Code of Ethics, but has coursework that distinguishes between "personal" and "professional" ethics. The latter is unambiguously identified with the NASW Code, whereas the former is represented as a potential source of prejudice.

University of Central Florida: A candidate "must comply with" the NASW Code of Ethics in order to "remain in school." On page 25 of the *BSW Student Handbook*, under the heading "Policy on Student Advancement" is the following proviso:

To remain in the School as a candidate for a bachelor degree in social work, a student must...

B. Comply with the standard of the "Code of Ethics" of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). [Link]

University of Houston: Students are required to sign a statement pledging adherence to the NASW Code of Ethics, which is kept in their permanent file. All students receive a copy of the Student

Standards Policy after admission, but prior to new-student orientation. After reading it they are required to sign the Student Standards Policy Contract and turn it in at or prior to orientation. Page one of the policy reads:

In order to meet its responsibilities to provide quality professional social work education and to ensure that its graduates are able to function in a broad array of professional activities, SW faculty evaluates the academic performance of students in six general areas: professional readiness, professional commitment, scholastic performance, attendance and punctuality, professional behavior, and ethical conduct.

1.06 Ethical Conduct:

1. Adheres to the NASW Code of Ethics and the Texas State Board of Social Worker Examiners Code of Ethics. [\[Link\]](#)

University of Michigan/Ann Arbor: Students who fail to adhere to the NASW Code of Ethics may be deemed guilty of "academic misconduct." In the *Student Guide*, under the heading "Grades in Academic Courses and in Field Instruction" we find:

The grading system for all Field Instruction courses consists of S (satisfactory), M (marginal), and U (unsatisfactory). Faculty liaisons are responsible for grading. Students are expected to adhere to the Social Work Code of Ethics (See Section 4.07), to follow agency policies and procedures, and to conduct themselves in a professional manner. Failure to meet these expectations may be reflected in field instruction grades and/or other action taken by the School (4.032, Academic Misconduct).

and Section 4.07 cited above includes a direct reference to the NASW Code of Ethics:

Social work students are expected to conduct themselves in all aspects of their school activities in a manner consistent with the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Work. Students who do not adhere to the Code of Ethics may be deemed to have engaged in academic misconduct and can be reviewed by an academic misconduct hearing panel (See Section 4.03.) [\[Link\]](#)

University of Minnesota/Twin Cities: Violations of NASW Code of Ethics can lead to dismissal. The NASW Code of Ethics is reproduced verbatim in the Student Handbook, starting on page 48. It lists "social justice" as one of the "core values" of the social work profession, on par with service, integrity, and competence. Page 68 specifically spells out the consequences of failure to adhere to this code:

Students in the M.S.W. program are also subject to the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics and the Minnesota Board of Social Work Standards of Practice and Ethical Conduct. Violations of any of these codes can result in disciplinary action, including dismissal from the M.S.W. program. [\[Link\]](#)

University of Texas/Austin: Students are required to sign a statement pledging adherence to NASW Code of Ethics, which is kept in their permanent file. The introduction to the Standards for Social Work Education implies that satisfactory performance will be judged, at least in part, on adherence to the NASW Code of Ethics. It reads:

Persons who teach and supervise students, along with program coordinators, will assess student academic performance and apply their professional judgment to determine if standards are being met during a student's educational career. Professional judgment is the capacity to assess a situation by applying the values and knowledge of the social work profession, combined with a professional's

own experience and practice wisdom. It also represents the application of knowledge, values, and skills to making decisions in a helping process.

All social work students will be provided with and expected to read the Standards for Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. Students will then be asked to sign an acknowledgment that they have read, are aware of the contents of, and will abide by the documents. The form will be kept in students' files. [Link]

University of Washington: Students can be dismissed for failure to comply with the NASW Code of Ethics. Page 43 of the *BASW Program Manual* (identical language on page 49 of *MSW Program Manual*):

Academic Performance and Conduct Which May Result in a Review and Possible Dismissal from the School of Social Work:

Students may be terminated from the School of Social Work for any of the following....

3. Behavior judged to be in violation of the NASW Code of Ethics (available at <http://www.naswdc.org> on the World Wide Web) or unprofessional conduct as specified by RCW 18.130.180 Unprofessional Conduct, Regulation of Health Professions-Uniform Disciplinary Act, Revised Code of Washington. [Link]

Wayne State University: Wayne State evaluates student performance in terms of conformity with the NASW Code, through a complicated set of criteria that can result in expulsion. First, the relevant Professional Code of Ethics is defined in Appendix A, on page 61 of the *Field Education Manual*:

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has an established code of ethics which all social workers are expected to follow. The NASW code of ethics strives to ensure social workers exceed public expectations and uphold a uniform set of principles. The primary focus of the profession is to improve the quality of life for people in need or requiring assistance. Special attention should be paid to oppressed, vulnerable, and poverty-stricken populations.

Appendix B of the Field Education Manual specifies several Student Performance Achievement Ratings according to which students can be assessed as failing. The Professional Development section includes a specific criterion for values and ethics (item #3, pages 68 and 82 for juniors and seniors, respectively):

Demonstrates behaviors which are consistent with the Professional Code of Ethics.

Since they don't offer an alternative code of ethics, it seems safe to assume that the rating is based on conformity (consistency) with the NASW Code cited in Appendix A. There are three subcategories under the Code of Ethics assessment: acceptance of client systems, nonjudgmental behavior, and confidentiality. The syllabi for the Field Practice courses (on pages 104 and 109) specifies that the critical aspect of a "client system" is "oppressed populations, in their transactions with the environment." The term "client system" obviously carries a great deal of ideological weight.

Although Professional Ethics is only one of a number of criteria for determining student performance for Field Practice, successful completion is compulsory for graduation. Finally, the manual implies that failure to maintain a "professional demeanor" can directly result in expulsion from the program. On page 57 we find:

Academic termination is expulsion from a School degree program based on academic performance, including marks received and professional demeanor. [Link]

Schools of Social Work At:	Accredited by CSWE	NASW Ethics Code Required
Arizona State University - Tempe	✓	✓
University of California - Berkeley	✓	✓
University of California - LA	✓	
University of Central Florida	✓	✓
University of Houston	✓	✓
University of Michigan - Ann Arbor	✓	✓
University of Minnesota - Twin Cities	✓	✓
University of Texas - Austin	✓	✓
University of Washington - Seattle	✓	✓
Wayne State University	✓	✓

3. Program Mission Statements and Self-Descriptions

In addition to avowals of adherence to the standards of accrediting and professional associations, social work schools and programs generally define themselves through their own public pronouncements. These can take the shape of mission statements, or "about the school" descriptions in brochures or on web sites. We were therefore interested in seeing whether posted mission

statements and comparable documents employed advocacy terminology wedded to goals that might be called "shibboleths of progressive ideology", to wit: "social justice," "oppression," "diversity," "multiculturalism," "social change," and "advocacy."

There is some significant variation. The references to multiculturalism in the UCLA curriculum description, for instance, are matter of fact. Nonetheless, a review of mission statements of the programs we examined reveals the considerable extent to which these shibboleths have become rooted in their self-definitions.

Arizona State University

From Mission Statement:

The School of Social Work prepares social work practitioners committed to social justice and to serving and empowering individuals, families, and communities....

Goals:

Preparing professionals who understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination that lead to poverty, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and ageism; and, who therefore advocate for social and economic justice.

Preparing professionals who understand and respect social and cultural diversity. [Link]

UC Berkeley

From Mission Statement:

Demographically, California is experiencing rapid population growth, particularly among its minority and refugee populations. Students and faculty need to address these changes in order to respond to the values and goals of the social work profession [sic]. These include recognizing the worth, uniqueness, and dignity of all individuals; fostering and strengthening the family and other systems of support; assisting individuals to enhance and fulfill their potential; advancing social justice; respecting cultural diversity; and promoting equitable opportunity and social and economic welfare for all, especially the disadvantaged and the underserved. [Link]

UCLA

From Description of Curriculum:

At UCLA, all MSW course content is presented in the context of a multicultural society and provision of services for a multicultural clientele... In the second year, advanced courses focus on how to effectively assess needs, provide services, and manage human resources among multicultural populations. [Link]

University of Central Florida

From Mission Statement:

The UCF School of Social Work... is committed to the pursuit of excellence in teaching and the promotion of competent, ethical social work practice. To this end, the Social Work program is guided by five principles. . . .

* Social workers provide moral, passionate and practical leadership in advocating for social and economic justice, in particular for the least powerful members of society.

* Social workers, as citizens of a global village, recognize and appreciate that cultural diversity enriches us all.

Faculty, students, and alumni are spurred forward by a collective passion and public resolve which strives for:

a society that seeks social justice and equality for all its members; a society in which all people are able to maximize their fullest potential; a society that values inclusion and embraces diversity; and, a society in which its members are responsive to all people and their concerns....

The BSW curriculum, nationally accredited by the Council on Social Work Education, aims to graduate social work generalists who have the abilities to:

* Plan interventions to advance social and economic justice, to combat inequities (such as poverty, racism, sexism, ageism and homophobia), and to minimize the negative effects of oppression on clients in given case situations.

Both the BSW and MSW programs seek to prepare students with a desire to prevent and resolve human problems, promote social justice, serve the poor and oppressed, and work to alleviate poverty, oppression and discrimination. [Link](#)]

University of Houston

From Mission Statement:

The mission of the Graduate College of Social Work is to advance social, economic and political justice and to advance knowledge for competent, ethical practice and leadership with diverse populations. [\[Link\]](#)

From Program Objectives:

The GCSW prepares students for responsible, professional practice. The program is expected to:

- Socialize students to the social work profession, including its Code of Ethics and values.
- Convey an understanding of the impact of racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, and classism on individuals, groups, social policies, and institutions. [\[Link\]](#)

From Student Objectives:

Students are expected to:

- Develop a broad perception of their roles and functions as social work professionals, including an understanding of, commitment to, and involvement in resolution of social problems through institutional changes and preventive measures.
- Demonstrate skills that reflect practice competence in a diverse, multi-ethnic society.
- Identify with the profession of social work, its historical tradition, values, and ethics, and its commitment to social and economic justice. [\[Link\]](#)

University of Michigan

From Curricular Objectives:

The Governing Faculty of the School of Social Work has mandated that all courses and field instruction in the School's curriculum should address four themes:

- * Multiculturalism and diversity
- * Social justice and social change

The School's curricular objectives reflect the faculty's conviction that the School must:
* foster social change through research and knowledge development. [Link]

University of Minnesota

From Mission Statement:

Located in a state known historically for its progressive innovations in human services and social reform, it has always emphasized social service and social justice in shaping its teaching, community service and research goals.... Building upon the University of Minnesota's and College of Education and Human Development's land-grant mission of education, research, and service, the mission of the School of Social work is threefold....

3. to provide professional outreach locally, nationally and globally. As the oldest public school of social work in the United states, the University of Minnesota School of Social Work promotes this mission through a tradition of scholarship, leadership, and commitment to the public good, social justice, and the empowerment of oppressed peoples. [Link]

University of Texas

From Mission Statement:

Through excellence in professional education, research, and service, The University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work provides national leadership to promote social and economic justice, alleviate critical social problems, and enhance human well-being.

Core Values:

We believe professional ethics and integrity are at the core of social work, and the values, principles, and standards that are set forth in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics should guide, as applicable, the conduct of our faculty, staff, and students; ...

- * We believe we should work to promote social justice and social change, and should strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice;
- * We believe that the attainment of our mission requires a high regard for the worth of each person and our collective potential, and that the dissemination of knowledge is enhanced by the presence of cultural and ethnic diversity in our classrooms;
- * We believe that, in order to enhance the social work knowledge base, the attainment of our mission requires critical thinking, professional development, and meaningful scholarship. As we improve our ability to transmit this knowledge to students and others effectively, we are better able to alleviate suffering and to promote social justice in the communities we serve. [Link]

University of Washington

From Mission Statement:

Social justice, empowerment, multiculturalism, social change.... [emphasis in original] are at the heart of our mission at the UW School of Social Work. We believe that the true test of the quality of a society is in the way it responds to its most vulnerable members.... As members of the University of Washington School of Social Work, we are committed to promoting social and economic justice for poor and oppressed populations and enhancing the quality of life for all. [Link]

Wayne State University

From Mission Statement:

As a School within an urban research university, the mission of the Wayne State University School of Social Work is to transmit, develop, critically examine, and apply knowledge to advance social work practice and social welfare policy in order to promote social, cultural, and economic justice for the betterment of poor, vulnerable, and oppressed individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations, and society... [Link]

Note that every school on our list employs some version of the diversity/multiculturalism theme in its self-description, testifying to the fact that this view of American society has become a virtual given in social work. Eight of the ten schools on our list specifically mention the advancement of social justice as a key component of their *raison d'etre*. Half the schools we surveyed made reference to advocacy in their mission statement or their "about" page.

From Student Manuals and Other Policy Documents

Another area where schools of social work establish ideological preferences is in their student handbooks or field manuals. Here we find specific statements of instructional intent, as well as official policies that determine academic standing. For instance, at Arizona State we not only find a statement requiring adherence to the NASW Code of Ethics, but a specific expectation about subscription to both multiculturalism and social justice. The paragraph describing the program in terms of curriculum content, on page B9 of the *Field Education Manual*, states the following expectation:

As derived from the curriculum content, the focus of the undergraduate field placement is on the establishment of professional identity including integration of professional values and ethics, relationship building skills, strategies of empowerment practice, promotion of social and economic justice, the context of the agency and community, and awareness and responsiveness to the diversity of peoples of the Southwest.

And in the same manual, under the heading "Responsiveness to Multicultural Client Systems" we find the following expectation:

The student will demonstrate an understanding of, and respect for, the positive value of diversity particularly as it relates to populations of the Southwest. The student will demonstrate an understanding of the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination.

In addition to requiring an ability to diagnose the "forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination" related to culturally diverse populations, there is a similar requirement for addressing remedies:

The student will intervene respectfully and effectively with diverse client systems to promote social and economic justice, with an emphasis on people of the Southwest. The student will demonstrate an understanding of the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination. [Link]

At the University of Maryland School of Social Work, the *Student Handbook* includes a set of statements depicting the values adopted by staff, faculty, and students in support of the school's mission. These include:

global economic and social justice for all individuals with particular emphasis on vulnerable, excluded, and marginalized populations. [Link]

At the University of Minnesota, the *Student Handbook* describes a "Direct Practice Concentration," or specialization, in the following terms:

The Direct Practice Concentration prepares students for advanced professional practice with diverse populations and in varied settings. Advanced practice is designed to enhance the ability of individuals, families, and small groups to ameliorate biopsychosocial and interpersonal problems and affect environmental conditions that contribute to problems. Our professional values guide us to educate and train advanced social workers in a context of supporting client strengths, pursuing social justice, and facilitating empowerment. These values also direct our faculty members to discover and create new practice knowledge and to seek the best available evidence to inform our practice expertise. [Link]

As mentioned previously, students at the University of Texas School of Social Work are required to sign a pledge of allegiance to the NASW Code of Ethics, but in addition these students are also required to make a similar pledge regarding the Standards for Social Work Education, which includes a "professional commitment...to the essential values of social work that include the respect for the dignity and worth of every individual and his/her right to a just share of society's resources (social justice)." At best, such a statement is vague concerning the definition of what a "just share" would be. Can professional ethics and standards be a reliable guide to education and practice if they're colored with ideological suggestiveness? [Link]

4. *Course Content*

The use of ideologically charged language can also be found among the course descriptions of nearly all social work programs, indicating that the politicization of the discipline is not confined to general statements, but also penetrates the classroom. Where they occur they generally assume the form of question-begging statements about the causes of hardship, or the nature of "social justice" or the goodness of "diversity/multiculturalism." Here are some examples:

Arizona State University

Diversity and Oppression in a Social Work Context SWU374 & SWG533

This course explores: Oppression based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and disability

status; models for intergroup relations; the historical context of group relations; cultural variables significant to Southwestern ethnic, racial and cultural minority populations. [Link]

Social Policy and Services SWG632

Course Objectives...

8. Define and discuss the concepts of economic and social justice and their relationship to policy analysis.
9. Identify the impact of institutionalized forms of oppression.
10. Analyze how racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other forms of societal oppression impact the policy arena, with particular emphasis on populations of the Southwest. [Link]

Introduction to Social Work SWU171

Course Objectives...

4. Explain how racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism affect social work clients and the practice of social work. [Link]

University of California - Berkeley

(SOC WEL) 233 Social Work, Social Change, and Social Justice

Two hours of lecture/discussion per week. The purpose of this course is to meet the needs of students interested in the way social work incorporates a social change and social justice perspective. The course is grounded in theoretical perspectives on social change and social justice, but it is also concerned with practical and professional matters such as change-focused direct practice, community organizing, legislative action, and other activities designed to give expression to the professor's [sic] social justice commitments. [Link]

University of California/Los Angeles

Cross-Cultural Awareness SW 205

Students are required to view the "Primetime: Racism/Discrimination" video that complements the Week 1 lecture on White Privilege. Course Objectives...

2. Identify and articulate the interaction process between ethnicity and other aspects of culture (e.g. socio-economic class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, health status, disability).
3. Examine and identify commonalities and differences between her/his own culture and other cultures.
4. Articulate an understanding of social customs, problems, and issues from culturally diverse points of view, including the experience of oppression and discrimination and the implications for one's professional role with regard to advocacy, social policy, and social change. [Link]

University of Central Florida

Practice I: Generalist Practice in Social Work SOW3300

Learning Objectives...

5. Show sensitivity to cultural and social diversity in given case situations.
6. Plan interventions to advance social justice and economic justice, to combat inequities (such as poverty, racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia), and to minimize the negative effects of oppression on clients in given case situations.
7. Demonstrate professional attributes of altruism, accountability, self-awareness, self-discipline, and social justice within given course assignments. [Link]

Practice II: Interpersonal Skills in Social Work SOW3352

Learning Objectives...

10. Demonstrate the ability to use interpersonal skills in advocating for social and economic justice in the advocacy assignment. [\[Link\]](#)

Integrative Research Project in Clinical Practice SOW6914

Learning Objectives...

4. Demonstrate an understanding of an impact of diversity issues such as ethnic, gender, gay/lesbian, disability, and social justice in the conduct and reporting of research. This will be evaluated based on the final research report. [\[Link\]](#)

University of Houston

The University of Houston provides a good example of a neutral course. The course in Social Policy Analysis appears to be an example of desirable pedagogy, providing knowledge and information about theorists and philosophers who both favor and are critical of social and distributive justice, such as F. A. Hayek and Milton Friedman.¹⁸ Yet the same institution lists Social Justice Theory (see text below), a course exploiting the pedagogical role by instructing students in methods seemingly designed to produce ideologically tendentious research results.

Social Justice Theory and Research (SOCW 8331)

Purpose:

This course in social justice theory and research focuses on the goal of social change and its relationship to social work scholarship. From the outset, social justice research contextualizes subjects in a broader understanding of the structures and processes of society and social change. By focusing explicitly on selected social justice theories and social change research methods, the course emphasizes the political, ideological, and social justice components of research, gives students alternatives to traditional research, and provides them with a direct springboard into thesis work grounded in the knowledge of social justice research. [\[Link\]](#)

University of Michigan

Introduction to Social Welfare Policy and Services SWPS 530-001

Analytic frameworks with regard to social welfare policies and services are presented. These frameworks identify strengths and weaknesses in the current social welfare system with respect to multiculturalism and diversity; social justice and social change; behavioral and social science theory... [\[Link\]](#)

Organizing for Social and Political Action COMORG 652

This course examines methods of organizing people for social and political action on their own behalf or on behalf of others. Students will analyze different approaches to bringing people together for collective action, building organizational capacity, and generating power in the community. The course includes the study of skills in analyzing power structures, formulating action strategies, using conflict and persuasive tactics, challenging oppressive structures, conducting community campaigns,

using political advocacy as a form of mobilization, and understanding contemporary social issues as they affect oppressed and disadvantaged communities. Special emphasis will be placed on organizing communities of color, women, LGBT populations, and other under-represented groups in U.S. society. [Link]

University of Minnesota

Theories & Practices of Social Change Organizing SW 3501

Welcome to SW 3501: Theories and Practices of Social Change Organizing, one of the required courses in the Social Justice Minor. In this course, we will look at various 20th and 21st century social change movements to study how everyday people work for social change. We will also look at how various activists work for social change, and finally we will engage in community-based education (service learning) where we will volunteer in social justice organizations locally. [Link]

University of Texas

Words Beyond Walls Program matches students with prisoners serving life terms in the Monroe Correctional Complex located in Monroe, Washington. *The students and prisoners review each other's writing and provide critical commentary on a range of policy issues discussed in the course.* [Link] [Italics ours. The suggested equality between students and prisoners struck us as arresting.]

Foundations of Social Justice (SW381S)

This course is based the following assumptions: (1) membership in a population-at-risk group (e.g., people of color, women, gay and lesbian persons) significantly influences an individual's life experiences, world view, and increases risk factors for exposure to discrimination, economic deprivation, and oppression; (2) professional social work ethics and values demand culturally competent practice; (3) it is necessary for students to learn to apply social justice approaches to influence assessment, planning, access to resources, intervention, and research; and (4) professionals and programs have strategies to critically analyze distributive justice, human and civil rights, and global interconnections of oppression. There is an emphasis in this course on the impact of discrimination and oppression by individuals and society on people of culturally diverse backgrounds and orientations. [Link]

University of Washington/Seattle

Muslim Families (SocW 495)

Course Objectives. At the end of the course, students will be able to...

3. Write about and discuss the distinction between Islam and marginal perspectives on Islam, and how the interaction of these perspectives affect Muslim populations in terms of social justice...
5. Write about and discuss the effect and interaction of cultural imperialism on Muslim communities, both within the United States and abroad, and how these forces contribute to complex human welfare problems.
6. Write about and discuss the foundations of Islamic counseling within the context of an ethical and just professional use of self. [Link]

Social Work for Social Justice (SocW 504)

SW 504 focuses on personal and professional development toward social work practice for social justice. This course complements the “Intellectual and Historical Foundations of Social Work Practice” by locating the self in a professional and political context. The course employs critically self-reflective, experiential and dialogic learning processes to engage students to explore personal meaning systems and narratives in the context of professional values of social justice, multiculturalism, human behavior theory, empowerment and globalization.

The purpose of this course is to enable students to articulate a personal-professional stance toward social work practice for social justice. The course will provide the theoretical and experiential human behavior and social environment knowledge base related to difference, dominance (oppression and privilege), social justice, and liberation. The course will provide a dialogic forum for students to: (a) critically examine their social identities and positionalities embedded in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, class, ability status, religion and national origin; (b) reflect on how socio-cultural beliefs, assumptions and value systems affect their social work practice; and (c) develop perspectives and approaches to working with and across social identities and positionalities. This course aims to help students develop the competencies of critical self-reflection, multicultural values and ethics, knowledge, awareness and skills in a variety of ways they can act against manifestations of social injustices and promote greater diversity and justice. (This is a required foundational course.) [Link]

Competencies for Social Work Practice for Social Justice - An Overall Framework:

This grounding in self and work toward social justice may be expressed through a number of dimensions that we refer to as competencies for social justice work - passion and commitment, personal awareness, knowledge, and skills. [Link]

Wayne State University/Detroit

Diversity/Oppression and Social Justice SW3110

This course focuses on issues of diversity, oppression and social justice. It is designed to prepare social work students to be knowledgeable of people’s biases based on race, ethnicity, culture, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, social and economic status, political ideology, disability and how these contribute to discrimination and oppression. Students will learn about diverse cultures, family structure, roles, immigration and assimilation experiences of marginalized groups. Students will also learn about the influence of dominant culture on these diverse and marginalized (population at risk) groups.

Knowledge Objectives...

4. Student will be able to identify theoretical frameworks/perspectives that facilitate the understanding of oppression in its varied forms...
7. Students will gain an understanding of the role research plays in understanding the needs of marginalized and oppressed populations and in generating the assets that increase the resilience and options of oppressed populations. [Link]

As was the case with public pronouncements, the most common element in the coursework cited above is the embrace of diversity/multiculturalism, with promotion of "social justice" a close second. The question-begging assumption that “oppression”—caused by everything from ethnocentrism to homophobia—is a leading cause of hardship is another common feature. Nowhere in these course descriptions is the possibility raised that client problems might be viewed even partly as a function of personal responsibility, individual effort, or community culture, surely hypotheses worth considering at both the level of theory and praxis.

Although it's certainly true that racism has been oppressive in American history, it seems question-begging to assume that "oppression" is a leading cause of poverty in the modern U.S. And it is far from clear that the only pathway to a non-racist or egalitarian society passes through the gateway of multiculturalism. There is also a venerable sociological tradition that identifies social, cultural, and "ethnic" cleavages as problems, not to be celebrated, but to be overcome by encouraging cross-cutting alliances between the members of diverse groups. This less sanguine view of diversity is not in evidence.

Another theme that permeates these course offerings is the promotion of advocacy and activism on behalf of the social justice/multiculturalism perspective. The University of Minnesota even offers a subfield specialization in "Social Justice" that includes a course in "Advanced Community Organizing and Advocacy" (SW 8505) [Link]. Likewise, a major theme of a course in Social Work for Social Justice (SocW 504) [Link] at the University of Washington is to engage students to "explore personal meaning systems and narratives in the context of professional values of social justice, multiculturalism, human behavior theory, empowerment and globalization."

As noted, The University of Michigan offers a course in political activism (COMORG 652). [Link] The course "examines methods of organizing people for social and political action on their own behalf or on behalf of others." Another course in community organizing at the same institution (SOCWK 560) [Link] emphasizes "multicultural community organizing, culturally sensitive management practices, culturally sensitive analyses of policy proposals and their impact, and culturally sensitive research practices." Advocacy and activism even permeate research instruction at Michigan and the University of Washington. At the University of Texas a course in the "Foundations of Social Justice" [Link] conveys this approach even more starkly. One of the five assumptions upon which the course rests is that: "it is necessary for students to learn *to apply social justice approaches to influence* assessment, planning, access to resources, intervention, and *research*" (emphasis added).

5. *Three Case Histories*

a. **Emily Brooker**

From asking that students promise to engage in social and political action, it is not that great a leap to requiring that they also engage in faculty-approved social and political action. Each of the following accounts comes out of a social work education program that was *not* in our sample. Nonetheless, they provide flesh and blood to abstract concerns about the kinds of abuses students can suffer as the result of social work education's ideological fixations. Consider the complaint that Emily Brooker later filed in a federal court.

In the fall semester, 2005, Emily Brooker, then a student in the Missouri State University's undergraduate social work program, enrolled in SWK 409, "Social Welfare Policy and Services II," taught by Professor Frank G. Kauffman.¹⁹ This was not her first experience with Professor Kauffman. In the first semester of this two-term course (SWK 309), Kauffman had "routinely

engaged in leftist diatribes.”²⁰ Some students, including Emily, protested. Kauffman stated openly that he was “a liberal” and that social work is a liberal profession. Emily received a C for the course, lodged an appeal, and after one full year, got her grade raised to a B by the department chairman.

In the second of the two courses, both necessary for graduation, the class was required to engage in a semester-long advocacy assignment. Professor Kauffman announced that the entire class would work on a project advocating homosexual foster homes and adoption. The project was to culminate in a letter to the Missouri state legislature urging homosexual adoption. This letter would be on MSU stationery and signed by each student.

Brooker told Kauffman that she did not want to sign the letter because it conflicted with her religious beliefs. She also enlisted the support of her social work advisor, who spoke with her colleague about respecting the beliefs of all of the students in his class. After several weeks, Kauffman reversed course. He announced that each student would have to complete an individual advocacy project, which could, but did not have to, include homosexual foster homes and adoption. He angrily told the class that some students had gone behind his back to complain to another professor about the homosexual adoption project, and then walked out of the classroom.

Just before the final exam for SWK 409, Brooker was notified that she was being brought up on the most serious charges in the Social Work Program, a “Level 3” violation of the Standards of Essential Functioning in Social Work Education. She was required to attend a hearing before seven faculty members. Her parents were not admitted to the hearing room and she was not permitted to record the proceedings. At the hearing, which lasted 2½ hours, the primary focus was on Brooker’s “discriminatory conduct” in refusing to sign the homosexual adoption letter.

The faculty committee told Brooker to write a paper on social work ethics, stressing how she could “lessen the gap” between her personal ethics and the professional ethics of a social worker. They directed her to state that she would not discriminate against homosexuals and that she would be willing to place children in homosexual adoptive homes. They also demanded that she affirm her commitment to the *NASW Code of Ethics* as well as the School’s Standards of Essential Functioning in Social Work Education.

Brooker was then required to present her paper (“Written Response about My Awareness”) to a faculty group and subsequently sign a contract promising to conform to the *NASW Code* and the School’s Standards. She signed the contract in January 2006 and graduated the next May.

Four months after graduation, in September, Brooker filed her civil rights complaint. The action alleged that faculty and administration of the social work program at Missouri State engaged in indoctrination rather than education, but her chief complaint was that the defendants who charged her with a Level 3 violation had engaged in “unlawful retaliation” for her protected speech, thus depriving her of equal protection as well as due process; and that she had been “denied full membership” in the academic community at MSU. She sought monetary damages, attorney fees, and declaratory and injunctive relief.²¹

Postscript: In November 2006, Emily Brooker settled her lawsuit against Missouri State University. The University agreed to clear the Level 3 charges against her, pay her \$9,000, waive academic fees at Missouri State or reimburse her for two years of degree work toward an MSW at any public

institution in the state, with \$3,000 per year for living expenses. MSU commissioned a comprehensive outside evaluation of its Social Work Program. Professor Frank G. Kauffman stepped down from his administrative duties as director of the Master of Social Work Program, was reassigned to non-classroom duties in the School of Social Work for the fall 2006 semester, and began weekly consultations with an Associate Provost to run at least through the spring 2007 semester.

b. William Felkner

Rhode Island College's School of Social Work, provides another case in which the First Amendment rights of a graduate student collided with politicized academic requirements in the Master's Degree curriculum.

In this instance, a self-identified "conservative," William Felkner, was surprised when he received a failing grade for his work in a course project requiring that students actively lobby the Rhode Island legislature in reference to proposed statutory measures bearing on social welfare policies. Although the students, including Mr. Felkner, were permitted to select their individual topics from a list of options provided by the program, they were informed that all lobbying efforts - once again including such inevitably controversial issues as homosexual marriage and abortion - were *required* to reflect a perspective mandated by the department. Thus, he was not free to analyze one of the suggested bills from a different point of view - his own -and received a failing grade for attempting to do so.

Mr. Felkner faced continued obstruction and hostility until January, 2007 when the department approved his master's project and assigned him a professor to work with on it. The master's project should have been completed from September 2005 through May 2006, however during that time the department refused to let Mr. Felkner work on the topic he selected. At this time, Mr. Felkner is not in his internship placement and not a fulltime student, so many of the resources needed for him to complete his masters project are not readily available to him. If his project is not completed this year, due to time limits placed on those participating in the program, Mr. Felkner will not receive his degree. In September of 2006, the school agreed to hire a consultant to investigate Mr. Felkner's claims, but to date, no investigation is underway.

c. Sandra Fuiten

In yet another case, Sandra Fuiten writing in the magazine *Campus Report Online*, 4 May 2005 [Link], described the conflict of conscience that led her to abandon her degree studies in the social work program at the University of Illinois, Springfield. Like Mr. Felkner and Ms. Booker, Ms. Fuiten discovered that, as a student in one of the program's required courses, she would be expected to lobby state legislators according to criteria prescribed by her professor. As she describes it, "I would have had to deny my political beliefs and moral intelligence just to get a passing grade in this class."

Her most significant and ultimately unacceptable trial emerged, however, when the professor in the course declared to her that it was impossible to be both a social worker and an opponent of abortion. Because this was fundamentally incompatible with some of her most deeply held religious convictions, she decided to withdraw from the program altogether.

It is only because of Ms. Booker's persistence and courage in resisting the political demands of the social work faculty at Missouri State University that we know about her case. Similarly, Mr Felkner and Ms. Fuiten were also willing to speak out. One surely is entitled to wonder how many instances of coercion occur without protest, because the students fear openly to dissent. Given the highly ideological and activist nature of contemporary social work education programs, we suspect they are not rare.

Conclusion

America's schools of social work need to reexamine their missions. It is understandable that the social work profession empathizes with its clientele, who are disadvantaged in many ways. But empathy is one thing, and orthodoxy and politicization in university programming are something else. We rightly expect all professions that deal with the human condition to be grounded in genuine sympathy. But we also rightly expect those professions to recognize and teach the importance of the continuing search for the truth, the need to listen to alternative views, and the need to seek objective bases for best practice. This is true of the training of physicians, psychiatrists, lawyers, law enforcement agents, and every other profession that works directly with the human subject, just as social work does.

Thus it is unacceptable when schools of social work define the substance of what they teach in terms of prescribed answers to important questions that are in fact unsettled. It is unacceptable for schools of social work to compel—or even to encourage—students to advocate for political causes that the social work profession, the school's faculty, or its administrators hold dear. And it is unacceptable when schools of social work bypass the hard and necessary work of examining the historical and social contexts of human suffering to present doctrinaire diagnoses. Schools of social work have educational obligations to their students and intellectual obligations to the university and society. As the report demonstrates, in key areas, schools of school work are betraying the pursuit of knowledge and systematically perverting the education of their students.²² This, together with the larger university community's failure to take the necessary corrective action, constitutes a genuine academic scandal.

Reform must begin at the top, however difficult it may be for the profession's lead organizations to rethink and abandon the hardened errors of their ways. The Council on Social Work Education, the national accreditor of social work programs throughout the United States, must revise its Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards to eliminate ideological code words and the ideology that stands behind them. CSWE must positively forbid mandatory advocacy requirements and follow through to make sure that schools of social work don't just disguise such requirements under some new obfuscating terminology. The only standards that are academically legitimate are those that respect a plurality of viewpoints and omit political requirements.

Likewise, the National Association of Social Workers, the principal social work professional association, must cleanse its Code of Ethics of political/ideological mandates. Social workers have a professional obligation to carry out the policies of the organizations they serve and, within that ambit, work for the best interests of their clients as they see them. But there is no ethical imperative

for social workers to adopt a particular ideological viewpoint and it is decidedly unethical to demand such of students as a condition for entry into the profession. Unless the CSWE and NASW make these reforms, their guidelines should have no role in the governance of social work education.

Because we know that asking these organizations to reform themselves is unlikely to move them unless something practical is at stake, we call upon America's universities and colleges to review the status of the CSWE as an accreditor of their social work programs, and of the NASW as an arbiter of professional ethics for their social work students. We also call on government agencies at the federal, state, and local levels to cease requiring that social workers hold degrees from CSWE accredited programs in order to be hired. By associating themselves with the ideological tests currently incorporated in these standards, such agencies violate constitutionally protected freedoms of speech and religious conscience. For similar reasons, government agencies must not endorse those elements of the NASW Code of Ethics which coerce conscience and speech.

Social work is hardly alone among university programs in having ideological proclivities and a strong penchant for advocacy. But its commitments in these respects are far more explicit and systematic than almost anywhere else. The failure of higher university authorities to challenge this vast misconstruction of mission represents a larger abandonment of the traditional principles of academic freedom and their corollary obligations. In order to defend academic freedom, higher education's senior authorities have to be clear to themselves and the public at large that they remain faithful to those norms of dispassionate, reasoned, rigorous, open-minded truth-seeking that much of social work education now flaunts. Only fidelity to these canons can justify the immunities from lay and legislative oversight that modern institutions of higher education claim for themselves. If universities are simply another venue for doing politics, or of settling disputes by reference to prescribed doctrine, they have no intellectually valid defense against external political actors who seek to force *their* opinions upon them. Politics is politics and doctrine, wherever it is found.

We therefore call upon those American universities and colleges that have social work education programs to vindicate the academic freedom of their faculty members and students by eliminating ideological tests and dogmatic commitments. We call on the American Association of University Professors, and all other higher education organizations pledged to the defense of academic freedom, to support this effort. We call upon public universities to prohibit their social work education programs from continuing to violate the First Amendment freedoms of their students and faculty by coercing conscience and speech. Failure to do so will surely expose them to more legal challenges.²³

We do not presume to prescribe an ideal curriculum for schools of social work, but we do, as supporters of liberal education, also strongly urge that universities ensure that social work programs pay attention to intellectual foundations. A social worker who is largely ignorant of American history faces an intellectually blinkered professional life in which there will be strong temptation to respond to problems according to the stereotypes and shibboleths of the moment. A social worker who is largely ignorant of political theory is unarmed against the appeals of demagogues who offer simplistic and sometimes unconstitutional remedies to complex problems. A social worker with no grounding in philosophy likewise is ill equipped to tell the difference between cogent reasoning and ideology, which superficially can look alike. A social worker not conversant with economics will be in a poor position to evaluate different approaches to the alleviation of poverty. We believe schools of social work should have entrance prerequisites in these areas or requirements for students who do not meet these prerequisites to make them up once enrolled.

Notes

1. Encyclopedia of Social Work, Eighteenth Edition. *History of Social Work and Social Welfare: Significant Dates* (Washington, DC: NASW Press, 1987), 780.
2. Ibid., 781.
3. Ibid., 785.
4. Ibid., 786-787.
5. Ibid., Nineteenth Edition. 1997 Supplement, *NASW Code of Ethics*. 371-385.
6. *Direct Social Work Practice: Theories and Skills*, Dean H. Hepworth, Ronald H. Rooney, Glenda Dewberry Rooney, Kimberly Strom-Gottfried, and JoAnn Larsen. (Belmont, CA: Wodsworth Publishing, 2006), 8.
7. John Rawls, "A Theory of Justice" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
8. Friedrich Hayek, *The Mirage of Social Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).
9. Robert Nozick, "Anarchy, State, and Utopia" (Cambridge: Basic Books, 1974).
10. *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943).
11. A more recent example in Supreme Court annals is the "Live Free or Die" case, in which the Court struck down a New Hampshire law making it a crime to obscure that well-known license plate motto. *Wooley v. Maynard*, 430 U.S. 705 (1977).
12. We restricted our sample to programs at public universities, because the politicization of programming at these institutions not only violates the traditional strictures of academic practice, but also raises serious constitutional issues.) Needless to say, we cannot claim that our findings typify the content of all social work education programs, but, given the size of the programs we reviewed and the prominence of the institutions at which they're located, we think that they're highly likely to be representative of the field as a whole.
13. Council on Social Work Education, *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (2001), as last corrected 11/02, 6 (italics added).
14. Ibid., 9.
15. Council on Social Work Education, *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (2001), as last corrected 11/02, Section 4.2, p. 11.
16. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. *Distributive Justice*. available <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-distributive/>, 5 March 2007
17. Documents posted by social work organizations and programs are, to be sure, not efforts to lay out lengthy theoretical expositions. But those who may think too much is being read into discrete words and phrases should weigh that possibility against the totality of the verbiage that is (and could be) cited. Moreover, even if one improbably believes that these terms are capable of absorbing almost any intellectual content, their use as assessment standards still gives impermissible license to individual administrators and faculty members to impose their own preferred meanings on students.
18. Social Policy Analysis (SOCW 8334) Purpose: "The purpose of this course is to critically examine the history and the nature of American social policy, particularly in relation to social work. The course will include a critical analysis of the evolution and transformation of social policy and implications for current and future social work practice."—Objectives: "Upon completion of this course, the student will be able to: 3. demonstrate an understanding of the complex and diverse cultural, racial, philosophical, and ideological issues that underlie social policy; 4. demonstrate an appreciation and commitment to the ethical principles and obligations that preserve a linkage between social work practice, practice research and social policy; and 5. integrate the knowledge of comparative social policy into the processes of need identification, policy formulation, methods of authorization, implementation, and evaluation..."

19. The facts of this case largely were drawn from the complaint filed in federal court by Ms. Brooker's attorney, *Brooker v. Franks, et al.*, U.S. Dist. Court, Western Dist. Mo., Case No. 06-CV-3432 (plaintiff's complaint).
20. *Ibid.*, 6.
21. *Brooker v. Franks, et al.*, U.S. Dist. Court, Western Dist. Mo., Case No. 06-CV-3432 (plaintiff's complaint)
22. Members of the social work profession are beginning to recognize this problem as illustrated in the comments of a recent book encouraging social work students to actually debate major policy questions. "Another problem is the profession's propensity to adopt a single authoritative position on complex issues. For example, one is struck by the consistency of the position statements emanating from various professional associations. Often, particular views are espoused as if they were universally accepted. It is assumed, almost *a priori*, that everyone in the profession has the same viewpoint on key issues. This is clearly not the case, and the diversity of viewpoints among social workers on these issues needs to be recognized. While it is appropriate for the profession to take positions on political and social issues that affect their members, these positions are sometimes adopted with dogmatic authority, when in fact, there are widely differing opinions among social workers on important questions." *Controversial Issues in Social Work Policy*, Howard Jacob Karger, James Midgley, Peter A. Kindle, C. Brene Brown (Allyn and Bacon, 2007), viii.
23. We especially call upon the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to cease using CSWE accreditation as the determinant of which degrees it will honor in hiring social workers.

Scandal of Social Work Education – Executive Summary

NAS Study Declares Social Work Education to Be a National Academic Scandal - Press Release

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