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Information for Deans and Directors on Regional Accreditation Standards for Faculty Qualifications

Issue/Problem from Regional Accreditors and Impact on Social Work Programs

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Department of Social Work Accreditation receives numerous questions regarding regional accreditors' requirements for faculty qualifications to teach at the graduate level. Questions come from different regions of the country that are under different accreditors, but the concern remains the same regardless of the accrediting body. The primary issue raised by programs is regional accreditors' responses to master's level social workers who do not have doctoral degrees teaching courses at the graduate level. CSWE recently reached out to regional accreditors to better understand their expectations related to faculty qualifications, so that CSWE can provide guidance to programs. Our goal is to support programs as they navigate the question of faculty qualifications. As a result, this document presents the following:

1. How the Current CSWE Standards Support the Use of MSW's as Faculty
2. Information Gathered from Regional Accreditors re: Faculty Qualifications
3. How Programs Can Respond
4. What CSWE Can Provide to Programs

Our Current CSWE Standards

CSWE's Commission on Accreditation (COA) uses the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) to accredit baccalaureate and master's level social work programs. Currently, CSWE accreditation standards for baccalaureate and master's program faculty recognize the master's degree in social work as a qualification for teaching in a social work program:

B3.2.4: *The majority of the total full-time baccalaureate social work program faculty has a master's degree in social work from a CSWE-accredited program, with a doctoral degree preferred.*

M 3.2.4: *The majority of the full-time master's social work program faculty has a master's degree in social work and a doctoral degree, preferably in social work. (EPAS, 2015)*

Field directors and field instructors are also required to hold a master's degree in social work from a CSWE-accredited program and have 2 years post-master's social work practice experience. These accreditation standards only apply to programs in social work. Institutional accreditation standards by regional accrediting bodies typically supersede our standards that may specify different qualifications regarding a terminal degree for teaching in a university or college.



Our Understanding from Regional Accreditors

After consultation with staff from two regional accreditors that oversee the majority of our accredited programs' institutions (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Higher Learning Commission), CSWE learned the following: 1) the standards from regional accreditors regarding faculty qualifications have not changed; 2) when responding to accreditation standards, programs must provide **a clear link between faculty qualifications and the courses assigned to each person, both full and part time faculty.** What has changed for regional accreditors is the expectation that more doctoral-prepared faculty are available to teach in graduate programs; hence, reviewers may question the use of master's prepared faculty to teach at the master's level.

What Programs Can Do

Regional accreditors typically expect teaching faculty to have earned the "terminal degree for the discipline" or at the very least, to have earned a degree one level higher than the level in which they teach (i.e. a masters to teach at the baccalaureate level, a doctorate to teach at the masters level). (For example, SACS issues [guidelines](#) for Faculty Credentials which speak to this issue.) More important than the actual degree, however, is the expectation that institutions justify the decision to have specific persons teach specific courses. Apparently, in the past, regional accreditors have been satisfied with a letter declaring that the MSW is considered the terminal degree for practice. This is in spite of the fact that the terminal degree for the discipline has been a doctorate for a very long time now (PhD and DSW). Some regional accreditors now appear to be scrutinizing teaching faculty credentials more closely. CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards continue to recognize the master's degree as an accepted qualification to serve as adjuncts or as full-time faculty to teach practice and field courses, both at the undergraduate and graduate level. For the purpose of regional accreditation of the institution, that practice could continue, but programs must provide documentation regarding persons hired related to experience in practice, years of teaching, awards or honors, licenses to practice, or other criteria the program used when making the hiring decision. In other words, explain why is this particular person qualified to teach this particular course?

Ultimately, it is the program's responsibility to justify and document the qualifications of their faculty for teaching all courses in their programs.

What CSWE can Provide

CSWE's policy has not changed. CSWE will, upon request, continue to provide letters to support programs as their institutions undergo regional accreditation reviews. The letter will emphasize that our current accreditation standards recognize the master's degree in social work as a sufficient and qualifying degree to teach in a social work program. Please contact your program's accreditation specialist if you are in need of a letter for your institutional accreditation review.

