

## Executive Summary

### Infusion of Gerontology Content in 2005 and 2006 Bachelor and Master of Social Work Accreditation Reports: A Content Analysis

With the aging of America, increased attention is being given to the needs of older Americans. In 2000, those ages sixty-five and older comprised 35 million people or 12.4% of the American population (United States Census Bureau, 2004). The proportion of the population age 65 and older is projected to increase to nearly 20% by 2030. In anticipation of these trends, social work educators and national organizations such as the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) have placed increased emphasis on preparing students for practice with older adults (CSWE, 2006; Kaye, 2005).

Examples of this increased focus include the John A. Hartford Foundation funded CSWE Strengthening Aging and Gerontology Education for Social Work project (SAGE-SW) and GeroRich projects, and the New York Academy of Medicine Practicum Partnership Program (PPP). The GeroRich projects developed a model for planned curricular and organizational change in order to infuse gerontological competencies and content in foundation coursework (Hooyman, 2006).

These projects have led to the establishment of the CSWE National Center for Gerontological Social Work Education (Gero-Ed Center) funded by the John A. Hartford Foundation. The CSWE Gero-Ed Center has developed initiatives to promote the development of gerontological competencies and expertise in BSW and MSW programs nationwide (Council on Social Work Education, 2006).

Given these four initiatives, there is a need to assess the degree to which gerontology content is being infused into social work academic programs. One method is to assess the extent of gerontology in social work education programs by examining the initial accreditation and reaffirmation self-study documents prepared by university and college programs for the CSWE Commission on Accreditation.

In 2006, CSWE approved a proposal to conduct this analysis as a Senior Scholar Project. The purpose of this executive summary is to present the major results from this content analysis. This research was completed during July through December, 2006. The primary purpose of the research was to document the frequency of gerontology related content in social work curricula as reflected in recent BSW and MSW self-study documents.

## Method

A pre-experimental exploratory case study and content analysis of gerontology content included in recent BSW and MSW self-study documents was performed to assess the infusion of gerontology in curricula and to determine differences among programs based on Hartford curriculum development funds. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. From October 2005 to June 2006, 79 initial accreditation or reaffirmation self-study documents were reviewed by CSWE. In the summer of 2006, the Director of the CSWE Office of Social Work Accreditation and Educational Excellence requested permission from these 79 programs to use Volume I of the self-

studies in this project. Forty-five programs gave permission and submitted their Volume I self-studies electronically. Accordingly, an availability sampling method was used. The response rate was 57%.

All major geographic areas of the United States were represented in the sample. Twenty-nine, or 64%, of the programs in the sample were BSW programs and ten, or 22%, were MSW programs. Six or 14% were combined programs. Twenty-six or 58% of the sample were classified as being located in public institutions, seventeen or 38% were classified as private sectarian and two programs, or 4%, as private non-sectarian institutions. Sixteen, or 36%, of the programs had 50 or fewer students. Eighteen, or 40%, had 51 to 150 students. Ten programs or 22% had over 151 students. One program was not classified. Thirteen, or 29%, of the programs in the sample had participated in the CSWE GeroRich or Curriculum Development Institute (CDI) projects.

Each self-study document was loaded into the qualitative analysis software program Atlas.ti 5.0 (Muhr, 2004). In this project, 10,621 pages of self-study text were entered into Atlas.ti 5.0 for analysis. Following the content analysis, telephone interviews were completed with 3 programs that reported high levels of gerontology content in their self-studies to determine the rationale and process for this infusion.

There are several limitations in this study. First, the results are representative of only those 45 programs which agreed to participate. Second, since this is the first time this analysis has been completed, there is no basis for comparison with the past. Therefore, this study provides only a baseline snapshot of the frequency and context of recent gerontology infusion. Third, it is probable that some of the programs which participated in this study are doing more in the area of gerontology than their self-studies reflect. Since self-study documents are written to demonstrate compliance with CSWE accreditation standards, programs may have not presented detailed discussions of their gerontology content. Lastly, the small sample size of 45 self-studies resulted in small categories for analysis which limits the strength of the results and conclusions.

## Results

First, the majority of gerontology content was infused in the curriculum areas of human behavior and social environment (HBSE), diversity, social-economic justice and vulnerable populations, and policy. To a lesser extent, the areas of practice, field instruction, research, and values and ethics reflected this content. This suggests that programs are including gerontology content in courses which serve as a foundation for practice and are often theory-driven. However, converting theory from HBSE, and knowledge from policy and diversity into practice knowledge and skills remains a challenge. Support from the CSWE Gero-Ed Center, as well as individual program efforts, will be needed to bridge the gaps from theory to practice in gerontology education.

Second, there do not appear to be significant differences among programs based on program auspice or size. There is, however, a difference between BSW and MSW programs. MSW programs, in this sample, reported higher levels of gerontology content than did the BSW programs. This may result from the fact that BSW programs are

generalist in scope while many MSW programs offer specializations or concentrations in aging related practice.

Third, the content analysis indicates that the number of gerontology-related key words is increasing over time. While the reasons for this increase are not completely clear, it could mean that the growing emphasis on gerontology education by CSWE is resulting in an increase in gerontology content by programs. This possibility is bolstered by the results of this study which show that GeroRich or CDI participating programs had more gerontology content in their self-studies than did non-participating programs.

Fourth, it is encouraging that the results of this study indicate that the Hartford Foundation investment in the CSWE GeroRich or CDI programs has resulted in an increase in gerontology content in the participating programs' curricula. A number of the participating programs in this analysis have increased course offerings and individual faculty are involved in gerontology research and community outreach.

Fifth, over 40 percent of the programs in this study reported using experiential learning exercises such as volunteer assignments, interviews with older persons, and field instruction to teach students about gerontology. Previous research has shown that these experiential opportunities can lead to an increase in positive attitudes about aging and in gerontology career aspirations by students (Downey & Miles, 2005).

Finally, both the content analysis and telephone interviews indicated that programs tended to have the most gerontology content if they articulated specific program goals or objectives for gerontology education. In those cases where there were no objectives related to gerontology, content on aging was more limited, defused, and tended to appear in theory-driven courses such as HBSE that typically include a portion of the course on later life and older adulthood. Programs that identified higher community needs for gerontology practice, faculty expertise and commitment, and organizational structure for infusing gero content across the curriculum also reported higher levels of gerontology content.

### Conclusion

The results show emerging themes and patterns which suggest that gerontology education is being infused into curricula in many programs. In addition, CSWE curricular development projects have demonstrated success in increasing gerontology content in participating programs (Hooyman, 2006). However, this study has also found that there are gaps in content across programs, and greater efforts are needed to move from the inclusion of gerontology content in foundation HBSE, policy, and diversity courses to practice methods and field instruction courses.

Since there is no basis for comparison of these findings with years prior to 2005, it is difficult to examine historical trends. Future research on this topic might replicate this content analysis method and begin examining the infusion of content on a five year longitudinal basis. This approach would identify changes in gerontological content over time, as well as whether changes have been sustained.

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