

ENVIRONMENTAL
SCAN FOR THE
2029 Educational
Policy and
Accreditation
Standards



COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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Foreword

2029 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards Environmental Scan

The world is changing faster than our institutions can keep pace. Climate disruption, pandemics, forced migration, shifting political perspectives and policies, and the rise of digital infrastructure have fundamentally altered the conditions of human life and the realities that shape where people live, how they survive, and whether they thrive. Global supply chains, information ecosystems, and cross-border policy decisions now reach into the most intimate corners of people's lives. In this environment of profound uncertainty, the question is not whether social work is needed. It is how social work will rise to meet the moment.

That requires clarity about who social workers are and what they uniquely offer.

As the helping professions expand, counselors, psychologists, nurses, case managers, and technology-enabled services increasingly occupy spaces once understood as distinctly social work territory. This is not a threat to be dismissed; it is a challenge that demands a confident, well-articulated professional identity. Without one, social work risks becoming interchangeable, peripheral, or invisible at precisely the moment when its perspective is most needed. That perspective is person-in-environment—and it is irreplaceable.

Social work does not locate human struggle solely within individuals, nor does it lay responsibility solely at the feet of broken systems. It holds both in tension, recognizing that strengths, needs, and barriers emerge through the dynamic, reciprocal relationship between people and the social, cultural, political, economic, and organizational environments in which they live and exist. It is a fundamentally different way of seeing that makes visible what other professions routinely omit.

Equally distinctive is social work's commitment to practice across interconnected system levels. From the individual to the family, group, organization, and community, social work integrates understanding and action across what are often called micro, mezzo, and macro practice. Rather than treating these as separate domains served by separate professions, social work holds them together because human lives are not lived in silos, and lasting change rarely happens at only one level.

This integrated, intersectional, values-driven orientation is what gives social work its power. The profession's commitments to human dignity, equity, access, and well-being are not abstract aspirations. They are carried into practice through every engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation across every setting and role in which social workers serve.

The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards affirm this foundation across baccalaureate, master's, and practice doctorate education. They also recognize what this moment demands: a curriculum that is not merely responsive to change but prepared to lead through it. The next generation of social work practitioners, scholars, and leaders

must be equipped to think critically, act ethically, engage in rigorous inquiry, and respond effectively across all levels of a complex and rapidly shifting world.

The environmental scan that follows is built on this enduring foundation. It is a call to prepare graduates not just for the profession as it exists, but for the profession as it must become.

We write this foreword in a moment of extraordinary challenge and transformation. Social work as a profession and social work education are being called to account for a world marked by deepening inequality, political polarization, climate-driven and conflict displacement, the uneven consequences of technological revolution, and persistent structural oppression.



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Purpose of the 2029 EPAS Environmental Scan

The purpose of this environmental scan is to examine the major trends reshaping social work education in the United States. Specifically, it aims to identify how political, economic, demographic, technological, and institutional changes are affecting how social work programs operate and how they prepare competent social workers across the education continuum.

The scan draws on national education and labor data, peer-reviewed research, surveys, and input from focus groups to identify the most consequential pressures on social work education. Beyond simply documenting these forces, the scan also intends to inform the development of the 2029 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), helping ensure that those standards respond to a more volatile and contested landscape while preserving the profession's core commitments.

The environmental scan serves as both a diagnostic tool identifying the external and internal pressures on social work education and a strategic foundation for updating the EPAS in a way that keeps the profession's values-driven identity intact.

Executive Summary

The 2029 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) environmental scan examines the trends reshaping social work education in the United States and, where relevant, globally. It focuses on how political, economic, technological, and institutional changes affect social work program operations and the preparation of competent social workers across the education continuum.

The environmental scan draws on national education and labor data, peer-reviewed research, surveys, and input from 16 focus groups held from 2024 to 2026 to identify the most consequential challenges to social work education. The scan identifies the most consequential pressures on social work education and includes implications for the 2029 EPAS. The environmental scan also examines current forces and the intensifying external and internal strains on social work education, aiming to maintain a coherent, values-driven identity that prepares graduates to practice effectively and ethically. It is intended to serve as the rationale for informing the development of the 2029 EPAS, helping ensure that those standards respond to the practice landscape and preserving the profession's core commitments.

The scan is organized across several major sections:

- challenges to social work education
- workforce trends
- broader trends in higher education
- trends within social work education
- changes within the academy
- technology and social work
- changing ways of learning and knowing

Taken together, these sections examine both the external pressures and the internal transformations shaping social work education and practice preparation.

At the center of this analysis is a foundational strength of the profession itself. Social work has long been distinguished by its person-in-environment perspective; its ability to work across micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice; and its commitment to engaging individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities in relation to the systems and conditions that shape their lives. Social work does not locate human struggle solely within individuals, nor solely within systems; rather, it prepares practitioners to understand and respond to the dynamic relationship between the two. This ability to adapt, integrate, and work across differences, settings, and system levels remains one of the profession's greatest strengths and one of the clearest foundations for future EPAS development.

Challenges to Social Work Education

The environmental scan finds that social work education is operating in an increasingly contested environment shaped by political pressures, legislative restrictions, questioning of accreditation, rising inequality, and intensified competition from adjacent helping professions and emerging technologies. These developments challenge not only what programs can teach in some settings, but also how clearly the profession articulates its identity and values. At the same time, the scan emphasizes that social work's distinctiveness lies in its integration of person-in-environment, structural analysis, a commitment to justice and human rights, and a dual focus on individual well-being and social change.

Workforce Trends

The environmental scan identifies important workforce shifts that have direct implications for curricular preparation. Social work employment is projected to grow in several high-need areas, including behavioral health, mental health, healthcare, and aging, while rural and underserved communities continue to face shortages. At the same time, students entering the profession are increasingly likely to be working adults, caregivers, and individuals balancing significant financial and personal demands. These realities suggest the need for continued attention to practice readiness, practicum models, access, and curricular responsiveness to emerging service demands and population needs.

Trends in Higher Education

Broader higher education trends also shape the context in which social work programs operate. These include rising concerns about educational debt, a growing reliance on return-on-investment metrics, demographic shifts affecting enrollment, expanded interest in alternative credentials, and increased expectations for flexibility, accessibility, and interprofessional collaboration. These pressures create tension between immediate labor market demands and the broader educational mission of preparing reflective, ethical, and adaptable professionals. For social work education, the challenge is not simply to respond to these pressures, but to do so without narrowing the profession's identity or compromising its commitments.

Trends in Social Work Education

Within social work education itself, the scan highlights continuing questions about field education, professional identity, degree differentiation, competency-based learning, and the relationship between educational design and workforce preparation. The scan also underscores the importance of clearly distinguishing social work from other helping professions and ensuring that this distinctiveness is visible across curricula, field education, and assessment.

Changes to the Academy of Social Work Education

Within the academy, external pressures are interacting with internal strains in ways that affect faculty, students, leaders, and program climate. The scan points to disruptions in traditional sources of knowledge, the effects of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation, increasing student debt, threats to research funding, changing expectations of academic leadership, and troubling gaps between social work's stated values and

some reported experiences within educational environments. It also identifies areas of institutional adaptation and investment, including accessibility infrastructure, more inclusive pedagogies, and evolving approaches to field education. Together, these dynamics raise important questions about how programs can better align the explicit and implicit curricula with the profession's ethical commitments.

Technology and Social Work

Technology is now woven into nearly every aspect of social work practice and education, from telehealth and digital documentation to mobile tools, data analytics, and artificial intelligence. The scan highlights the need for stronger preparation in foundational digital knowledge, practice-integrated technology skills, and leadership related to technological adoption and governance. Artificial intelligence (AI), in particular, presents both significant promise and serious risks, including the potential to expand access and efficiency while also amplifying bias, weakening human judgment, and undermining relationship-based practice if used uncritically. The scan concludes that technological competence is no longer peripheral to professional preparation and must be addressed as part of responsible, values-based social work education.

Ways of Learning and Knowing: Pedagogical and Andragogical Innovation

The scan points to the importance of educational approaches that reflect how students learn in contemporary contexts and how the profession defines and assesses readiness for practice. This includes growing interest in simulation, technology-enhanced learning, flexible delivery models, accessibility and Universal Design for Learning, more intentional field integration, and stronger attention to adult learners and students with complex work and caregiving responsibilities. These developments suggest that social work education must remain open to pedagogical innovation while ensuring that new approaches remain grounded in professional values, human relationships, and rigorous practice preparation.

Implications for 2029 EPAS

The implications for the 2029 EPAS are presented around five key themes that emerged across these sections. First, the scan affirms social work education must remain grounded in its identity and values, and must be strengthened to distinguish the unique contributions of social work. Second, the scan reaffirms the centrality of person-in-environment as the framework that distinguishes social work, recognizing that competent practice requires attention to both immediate human needs and the broader conditions in which they are produced. Third, it underscores the importance of human dignity, respect, human rights, and justice as enduring anchors of the profession. Fourth, it affirms the role of structural and systemic analysis as an essential competency for understanding how institutions, policies, and power shape lived experience. Fourth, it affirms social work's enduring dual focus on individuals and society, recognizing that competent practice requires understanding that the environment encompasses global, digital, ecological, political, and economic conditions. Fifth, it highlights the need for practice preparation in a technological, global, and rapidly changing world, where AI, digital systems, global migration, workforce changes, and new models of service delivery increasingly shape practice realities.

These themes emerged across the scan, reflecting a variety of internal and external influences. Social work education is navigating intensifying political and legislative pressures, including efforts to restrict how programs address racism, inequality, gender, sexuality, and structural systems. At the same time, the profession faces changing workforce expectations, expanding competition from adjacent helping professions, and growing demands for technological fluency. Focus group

participants also described tensions within academic environments themselves, including gaps between espoused values and institutional behavior, the strain placed on leadership, barriers within field education, and the need for more inclusive and accessible learning environments.

The scan also makes clear that social work’s distinct identity must be more explicitly articulated and carried across curricula, field education, and assessment. Together, the scan’s findings reflect a broader conclusion: The profession’s values, identity, and practice expectations must be both preserved and expressed with greater clarity in a changing environment.

Technology and AI are especially important examples of this changing environment. Digital systems now shape communication, documentation, service delivery, access to resources, and decision-making across practice settings. Social workers must be prepared not only to use technology effectively, but also to evaluate its ethical implications, challenge bias, and help shape its implementation in ways consistent with human dignity and professional values. As one focus group participant stated, “Social work, of all professions who have a seat at the AI table, we are the profession that understands the human condition.” The scan suggests that technological competence is no longer optional or peripheral; it is increasingly part of responsible practice preparation.

In general, the environmental scan suggests that social work education stands at a moment of significant change, but not without strong foundations on which to build. The profession’s person-in-environment orientation, multilevel practice framework, and values-based commitment to dignity, justice, and human relationships remain highly relevant and urgently needed.

The environmental scan does not assume that EPAS alone can resolve the structural pressures facing social work education. It does suggest, however, that clear, evidence-informed, and future-facing standards can help programs navigate this moment with greater coherence, confidence, and integrity. The mission remains the same: to prepare ethical, competent social workers who can serve every person with dignity, respect, and professional skill while responding effectively to the realities of a changing world.

The 2029 EPAS must build on these enduring strengths to support a curriculum that is nimble, forward-looking, and capable of preparing practitioners for the next decade. Just as social work education prepares graduates to practice flexibly and ethically in changing environments, the curriculum itself must be able to evolve with clarity, purpose, and integrity.



Implications for 2029 EPAS

Theme 1	Importance of Social Work Identity and Values
Theme 2	Person-in-Environment Framework
Theme 3	Human Dignity and Respect
Theme 4	Systemic and Structural Analysis
Theme 5	Preparation for Technological and Global Practice

Sources of Knowledge

The EPAS environmental scan drew on multiple sources of knowledge, including reports from government agencies, social work organizations, and peer-reviewed journals. The Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Commission on Educational Policy (COEP) conducted focus groups with CSWE constituent groups from 2024 to 2026, including CSWE commissions and councils, the Board of Accreditation, and social work faculty, students, program directors, and administrators from CSWE-accredited programs. Findings from the focus groups provided additional data and context for the environmental scan.

It is worth noting that the epistemological foundation of social work education has always drawn on diverse sources of knowledge, including empirical research, practice wisdom, theoretical frameworks, and legislative mandates, which shape the profession's scope and responsibilities. Recently, however, social work and other evidence-based disciplines have been under pressure to defend what "counts" as legitimate knowledge in curriculum design and the extent to which legislation should shape educational priorities.

The challenge is not simply staying informed about laws affecting social work and higher education, but deciding how to integrate those legislative requirements into curricula without abandoning the profession's values-driven, evidence-informed approach. Social work grapples with the complexity of translating legislative mandates into educational content that serves students without compromising professional ethics or evidence-based practice. As legislation becomes more specific about the content that can be taught in each state, particularly regarding marginalized populations, educators face difficult decisions about maintaining curricular integrity while operating within legal constraints.

Challenges to Social Work Education

Social work education enters this period of change with significant strengths. The profession is grounded in a person-in-environment perspective, a commitment to human dignity and justice, and an ability to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities across systems. Social work has long adapted to changing social conditions while maintaining its focus on ethical, evidence-informed, and relationship-centered practice. At the same time, the current moment presents a set of overlapping challenges that test the profession's ability to sustain that distinctive identity and prepare graduates for increasingly complex practice environments. This section examines those challenges and the implications they hold for social work education.

“The way we’ve known social work for decades will change.” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Social work education is confronting a set of overlapping challenges that threaten both the profession's identity and its ability to serve vulnerable populations effectively. Programs must navigate threats to democratic institutions, increasing competition from other helping professions and emerging technologies, rapidly shifting legislative environments, and the need to reexamine foundational frameworks in a more complex and polarized world. Together, these dynamics call for deliberate analysis and strategic planning in social work.

The Changing Political Landscape

Today's political environment presents unprecedented challenges to social work education, as state legislation increasingly threatens curriculum content on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). States across the nation have enacted or proposed laws limiting how institutions can address systemic oppression, intersectionality, and social justice in educational settings. These laws put faculty and institutions at risk in some states and alter how social work programs can prepare students for contemporary practice.

These legislative changes extend beyond mere content restrictions; they're reshaping the institutional climate in which social work education operates. Universities and colleges face financial penalties, accreditation hurdles, and political pressure when the curriculum addresses the realities of discrimination and structural inequality that social workers regularly encounter in practice. This legislative landscape may compel educational administrators to comply with restrictions that undermine preparation for real-world practice, which could be at odds with social work values and Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) criteria, or risk institutional sanctions.

“Social services are not your friendly, visitor, charitable organizations anymore. It may be business ventures, *Fortune* 500 partnerships.” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

The efforts to deregulate higher education are genuine and will have a substantial impact on social work education. Proposals threaten to disband current accrediting institutions and replace them with federally approved curricula, mission, faculty, teaching methods, and

more (Exec Order No. 14279, 2025). That would give the federal government the option to contract out implementation to private, perhaps for-profit institutions at its discretion.

The implications are profound. For one, higher education is key to democracy (Tierney, 2021). Higher education is the most effective means of enhancing equity, inclusion, and opportunities for all. In social work, education not only increases students' knowledge but also carries that knowledge forward to uplift others in society who may need specific knowledge and skills.

Social workers in the field encounter clients whose lives are shaped by systemic inequities, discrimination, and marginalization. When education fails to adequately prepare practitioners to understand and address these factors, the quality of services declines. Furthermore, legislative restrictions signal to the broader society that certain populations deserve less thoughtful, less comprehensive attention from helping professionals. This threatens both the integrity of social work education and the welfare of the vulnerable communities that social workers serve.

“Expand what *DEI* means to include viewpoint and perhaps even political diversity.”

— FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Growing Inequality

Research published by Oxfam (2022) reveals that the richest 1% of U.S. households have accumulated almost 1,000 times more wealth than the poorest 20% over the last 3.5 decades, with inequality worsening at a rapid pace. Between 1989 and 2022, a top 0.1% household gained an average of \$39.5 million in wealth and a top 1% household gained \$8.35 million, while a bottom 20% household gained less than \$8,500 over the same period. Over the past year alone, the wealth of the 10 richest U.S. billionaires soared by \$698 billion, bringing the top 0.1%'s share of total wealth to a record high of 12.6%.

“When we look at equity and inclusion for folks that can't afford 900 hours of unpaid placement ... We started with, like, 55 students this semester; 10 of them have had to drop out of practicum just because of the lack of hours, lack of places.” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

The report further highlights that inequality has been shaped by historic and ongoing discrimination based on race and gender: Between 1989 and 2022, the wealth of the average White household grew 7.2 times faster than that of the average Black household and 6.7 times faster than that of the average Hispanic household, while the average male-headed household accumulated four times the wealth of the average female-headed household. These trends are compounded by long-run wage stagnation at the bottom of the income distribution—a 2024 analysis by the Economic Policy Institute (2024) found that wages for the top 1% had risen by 182% since 1979, compared with just 44% for the bottom 90%.

Rising inequality and stagnant middle-class income growth have inflicted compounding damage on the broader U.S. economy. Rajan (2010) argues in *Fault Lines* that growing inequality drove many families to borrow beyond their means to sustain consumption, and that this overleveraging was a significant contributing cause of the 2008 financial crisis. The result is an economy precariously balanced on the spending of the ultrawealthy—a

structurally fragile position (Reich, 2010). Beyond its macroeconomic effects, the erosion of the middle class imposes real hardships on families, limits upward mobility, and narrows opportunity. More broadly, growing inequality disrupts social cohesion, fuels populism and nativism, undermines trust in democratic institutions, and drives political polarization both domestically and globally (Reich, 2010; Rajan, 2010).

Democracy, Governance, and Social Work's Evolving Role

The realignment of institutional authority and expansion of executive power are fundamentally reshaping the political and organizational contexts in which social workers practice and define their professional role within society. As the executive branch asserts its constitutional mandate relative to legislative and judicial institutions, social workers are encountering new ethical considerations, emerging practice challenges, and expanded responsibilities for engaging in evidence-based advocacy on behalf of populations navigating the effects of administrative and regulatory reform. For more than a century, social work has emphasized policy advocacy and social change through democratic processes. Students learn to engage in legislative advocacy, community organizing, and institutional reform. However, as executive orders and actions increasingly replace legislative processes as the primary means of policy change, social work must strategically adapt its approach to advocacy and macro practice. Students require education on the implications of governance shifts, strategies for advocating within rapidly changing policy environments, and ethical frameworks for navigating contexts in which the rule of law is being challenged. Students must learn how to negotiate on behalf of those whose voices are minimized, using the language and tactics that will influence decision-makers.

Furthermore, social workers often occupy positions as frontline implementers of policies, creating tension between professional values and institutional requirements. Whether addressing immigration enforcement, welfare policy changes, or restrictions on reproductive health services, social workers require preparation for the ethical complexities of implementing policies that may conflict with professional values and client interests. Education must address how practitioners can maintain professional integrity while operating within institutional constraints. This includes building skills in ethical decision-making, consultation and supervision-seeking, and collective advocacy so that social workers can simultaneously navigate immediate dilemmas and work to transform the systems in which they practice.

Social work education must also prepare students to understand their role as advocates for democratic processes themselves. Social workers may find themselves defending democratic norms and practices, not merely within their professional sphere but as engaged citizens. This represents an expansion of social work's traditional civic role, requiring educators to explicitly address democracy, governance, and social work's responsibility for maintaining and strengthening democratic processes. Social workers must stand tall in defending everyone's human rights at a time when universal rights are being challenged, and the rights of some individuals and institutions are being prioritized over others.

As governance shifts and global challenges mount, social work education must evolve to equip practitioners to not just serve clients, but defend democracy and engage across borders.

Narrowed International Perspective

At times, social work education in the United States has been characterized by insufficient attention to global contexts, international social welfare systems, and transnational factors that affect the well-being of those we serve (Blackwell & Phillips, 2023; Kahn & Sussman, 2015). This lack of international perspective can foster isolationism, leave practitioners unprepared for an interconnected world, and undermine social work's international professional identity and capacity for cross-national learning and practice. To address this gap, social work curricula should more explicitly integrate global content, comparative policy analysis, and transnational perspectives so that students can situate local practice within broader global dynamics.

American social workers increasingly encounter clients shaped by global forces: refugees fleeing violence or persecution, individuals affected by international economic policies, families separated by immigration systems, and communities experiencing the effects of American military or political interventions abroad. Yet many curricula provide minimal international content, leaving practitioners with an incomplete understanding of individuals' lived experiences and the systems that affect them.

Beyond direct service, the profession benefits from learning social welfare and social work policy and practice approaches utilized by other countries. Different nations have experimented with various approaches to healthcare, housing, income support, education, and social protection, offering valuable lessons about what works in other contexts. American social workers' limited familiarity with international best practices and alternative social welfare models restricts the profession's capacity for innovation and improvement.

Furthermore, professional ethics emphasize cultural humility and awareness of one's own cultural context. Social workers educated exclusively within U.S. frameworks may be less likely to recognize the culturally situated nature of their practice approaches, potentially mistaking context-specific interventions for universally applicable best practices. International engagement and comparative analysis help practitioners develop the sophistication to recognize their own cultural positioning.

Social work education must expand its international content across the curriculum, not only through specialized global practice courses, but also by incorporating international examples, comparative analysis, and attention to global context throughout coursework. Students and programs should engage with international social work organizations, learn about social welfare systems in various countries, and consider how global forces influence individual and community well-being. This expansion of perspective not only strengthens preparation for direct practice with diverse populations, but also enriches the profession's collective knowledge and capacity for innovation.

Social Work Identity in a Competitive Helping Professions Landscape

Social work's professional identity faces unprecedented pressure from technological innovation, expanding roles in adjacent helping professions, and the proliferation of alternative service delivery models. As competing professions widen their scope and technology companies develop apps that provide counseling-like services, social work educators must clearly articulate what distinguishes social work from related fields and what social workers uniquely offer to individuals, families, communities, groups, organizations, and societies.

Technology presents a novel challenge (CSWE, 2025a). Apps and artificial intelligence (AI) systems now provide mental health screening, preliminary assessments, crisis intervention guidance, and therapeutic support without the involvement of human practitioners. While technology offers valuable tools for expanding access to services, the proliferation of AI-driven assessment and intervention systems raises questions about what elements of social work practice are critical and what can be appropriately delegated to technology. This challenge forces the profession to articulate its distinctive value beyond technical service delivery in a clear manner.

Simultaneously, licensed professional counselors, marriage and family therapists, psychologists, and nurses increasingly provide services historically associated with social work. These professions have expanded their educational requirements and clinical scope to encompass direct practice, mental health treatment, and community intervention. Growing awareness of mental health has led to a surge in demand, creating a 50-fold increase in the workforce since 1970 (Heisler, 2018).

Without clear differentiation, social work risks becoming perceived as merely another clinical service provider among many, losing the distinctive identity that has defined the profession for more than a century.

What, ultimately, makes a social worker a social worker? The answer cannot rest solely on credentials or specific interventions, as these are increasingly overlapping with those of competing professions. Instead, social work's distinctive identity emerges from its commitment to person-in-environment practice, systemic and structural analysis, social justice and human rights frameworks, and dual focus on individual well-being and social change—embodied in social work's professional code of ethics. Social workers maintain allegiance to vulnerable and oppressed populations, attend simultaneously to individual and structural factors affecting well-being, and understand their role as inherently connected to broader social change efforts. Social work education must ensure that curricula explicitly teach these distinctive dimensions, helping students understand and articulate their unique professional identity.

Educational programs must also help students develop critical-thinking skills to discern which emerging technologies and service delivery models are compatible with social work values, and which represent fundamental departures from the profession's mission. The curriculum should go beyond teaching specific clinical techniques to teaching the philosophical and ethical foundations that guide professional decision-making. In doing so, programs will prepare graduates to not only apply existing tools, but question them, resist those that undermine human dignity and justice, and participate in shaping new models of practice that align with social work's core values.

Conclusion

Social work education faces interconnected challenges, with implications for both professional identity and effective service provision. Legislative restrictions on curriculum content, the competitive encroachment of other helping professions, rapidly changing governance structures, the need to reconceptualize foundational frameworks, and insularity from global perspectives all call for strategic, thoughtful responses. We must stand as one profession, with the same values and standards throughout the United States, that align with international expectations of social workers.

These challenges are not separate problems calling for siloed solutions; rather, they represent interconnected dimensions of a broader crisis in how social work understands and prepares for its role in contemporary society. Addressing these challenges requires returning to core social work values and ethics while simultaneously expanding educational frameworks to encompass contemporary complexities. Social work educators must articulate what makes social work distinctive, ensure that curricula prepare practitioners for real-world practice contexts, and develop perspectives to include global and environmental dimensions. In doing so, social work education can maintain its integrity and capacity to serve vulnerable populations, even as the future grows more uncertain.

Reimagining Person-in-Environment: Returning to Values

The person-in-environment perspective has long served as the organizing principle of social work, yet today's rapidly changing global context demands that we reimagine this framework for contemporary practice. Social work's founders understood the critical importance of integrating the complex physical environment into effective practice. Now, social work education must return to these first principles while simultaneously expanding environmental analysis to encompass the geopolitical, economic, and ecological dimensions that many curricula have previously underemphasized.

Today's environmental consideration must extend beyond close human relationships, communities, and socioeconomic contexts. We must also examine the immediate physical environment, the global landscape, and our technologically mediated world. Every competent social worker requires a deep understanding of intersectionality, disability, human development across the lifespan, and cultural diversity—not as separate topics, but as fundamental lenses. Clients presenting with mental health challenges, substance use disorders, housing instability, or any other social problem are simultaneously navigating identities that intersect in complex ways. Social workers must therefore integrate multiple dimensions of understanding: how environmental degradation affects physical and emotional health, how global events affect the populations we serve, and how technology simultaneously helps and harms the people we work with.

The “person” dimension of person-in-environment demands deeper engagement with how multiple, intersecting identities shape service users' lived experiences. Social workers understand that human sexuality, disability rights and experiences, race, religion, and intersectionality are not supplementary topics but essential content for practitioners serving diverse populations. Social work education must strengthen values and ethics coursework to provide the moral foundation necessary for navigating culturally competent practice. This foundation enables practitioners to engage authentically across differences while maintaining fidelity to professional values, regardless of the prevailing political climate.

While social workers have focused primarily on immediate family and community systems in recent decades, 21st-century practice requires an understanding of global contexts, international human rights frameworks, environmental justice, and transnational forces that affect individual and community well-being. Climate change, pandemic response, forced migration, international human trafficking, and global economic systems all profoundly shape clients' lives. Education that fails to situate individual and community problems within these broader environmental contexts provides incomplete preparation for contemporary practice.

Strengthening values and ethics in the curriculum provides the anchor that allows social work to maintain its professional identity and commitment to vulnerable populations even as external pressures mount. When educators explicitly connect culturally competent practice, environmental analysis, and professional ethics, they frame comprehensive, inclusive education as fundamentally aligned with social work values—not as a political agenda, but as professional integrity in action.

The following figure illustrates this central point—social work’s distinct identity lies not in any single setting or technique, but in the integration of professional values across person-in-environment practice, systemic and structural analysis, human dignity and respect, and a dual focus on the individual and society. Social work education must make that distinctiveness visible in how it prepares future practitioners through philosophical foundations and practice preparation.



Social Work’s Distinctive Identity

1

Person-in-Environment Practice
Situating individuals within their social, cultural, and structural context — not just treating symptoms in isolation.

2

Systemic & Structural Analysis
Understanding how institutions, policies, and power structures shape individual and community wellbeing.

3

Human Dignity and Respect
Allegiance to vulnerable and oppressed populations, grounded in a professional code of ethics — not just client preference.

4

Dual Focus on Individual & Society
Simultaneously addressing personal wellbeing and advocating for structural change — a role no other profession claims as its core mandate.

What Education Must Do

Teach the Philosophical Foundations

- Articulate what distinguishes social work from adjacent fields
- Embed professional identity throughout the curriculum, not just ethics courses
- Help students name and own their unique perspective
- Ground practice decisions in values, not just techniques

Build Critical Practice Skills

- Discern which tools align with — or undermine — social work values
- Question AI systems that may compromise human dignity
- Resist service models that reduce people to data points
- Shape new practice models across system levels, rather than adopting existing ones

Workforce Trends

This section examines current trends in the social work workforce to inform revision of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). It considers trends across bachelor of social work (BSW), master of social work (MSW), and doctor of social work (DSW) degree levels; and addresses emerging changes in workforce composition, job functions, and skill requirements necessary across degree levels. The social work profession is expanding into new areas of practice while facing evolving challenges related to technology integration, clinical specialization, and equity. Social work education programs stand to benefit by strengthening collaborations with practice-based organizations to enhance workforce readiness and responsiveness.

Given the breadth and diversity of the social work profession, understanding workforce trends requires synthesizing data from multiple, often fragmented sources. Unlike other health professions in the United States, social work lacks a centralized system for monitoring social work workforce supply, demand, or practice patterns. As Kim (2025a) and other scholars have noted, federal data systems such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) routinely undercount social workers because job classifications are split across multiple occupational categories, many positions do not carry the title *social worker*, and state-level variations in licensure blur the boundaries of who is counted (Lombardi et al., 2024). Consequently, we rely on several sources, including the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), CSWE, state workforce studies, and federal projections to understand the trends shaping workforce needs.

Despite these limitations, a coherent picture is emerging: The social work workforce is growing, increasingly specialized, technologically integrated, and experiencing shortages in key practice areas, particularly mental health. These dynamics have implications for curriculum design, field education, licensure preparation, and the future of generalist, specialized, and doctoral practice training across BSW, MSW, and DSW programs.

- ▶ The demand for the social work workforce is growing faster than the pipeline, particularly in rural areas.
- ▶ +15% projected behavioral health growth by 2034
- ▶ 90% of the profession specialize in just 3 practice areas
- ▶ Social workers make up the largest share of the behavioral health workforce.
- ▶ Federal funding cuts now threaten to shrink the training pipeline meant to address those gaps.

Challenge of Workforce Measurement

As noted, accurately measuring the social work workforce remains a persistent challenge for educators, regulators, and policymakers, as commonly used national data sources yield widely divergent estimates of both the number of social workers in the United States and where they work, with totals ranging by several hundred thousand workers (Lombardi et al., 2024).

Five primary data sources are commonly used to gather such information: (1) the American Community Survey administered by the U.S. Census Bureau; (2) BLS; (3) the

National Plan and Provider Enumeration System from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services; (4) licensure data from the ASWB; and (5) graduation data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. The heterogeneity of job titles, roles, settings, and licensure status means that no single federal or professional dataset currently provides a definitive count of the workforce or a complete picture of its demographics, education, practice settings, and geographic distribution.

In part because of this fragmented landscape, the ASWB launched the 2024 Social Work Workforce Study Series (Kim, 2025a). The series includes an executive overview (Kim, 2025a) and four reports: (1) analyses of the self-identified social work workforce using U.S. Census Bureau household surveys (Kim, 2025b); (2) a profile of the licensed social work workforce based on the 2024 Social Work Workforce Survey (Kim, 2025c); (3) a report on the nonlicensed social work workforce (Kim, 2025d); and (4) a report on registered social workers and social service workers in Canada (Kim, 2025e). Together, these studies represent the largest coordinated effort to date to align workforce questions across datasets and to reduce duplication, while still underscoring the need for a more systematic, unduplicated national data infrastructure for social work.

Another effort to gather accurate and useful workforce data is the Social Work Cross-Profession Minimum Data Set (SWCPMDS), which was recently developed through the input and endorsement of the SWCPMDS Task Force, a group led and hosted by the ASWB. The task force members included regulators, practitioners, academics, and social work professional association members from across the country. These professionals worked closely with Veritas Health Solutions staff to develop a data collection tool appropriate for social work. This tool is a standardized set of core questions designed for implementation by regulatory boards during regular license renewal, with the aim of better tracking workforce shortages, workforce demographics, and social work practice setting dispersal rates to improve long-term workforce planning. The SWCPMDS was published in October 2025 by Veritas Health Solutions and sponsored by the Healthcare Regulatory Research Institute (Veritas Health Solutions, 2025), and it is ready for implementation by social work boards across the country. If widely used, the SWCPMDS is certain to provide useful, consistent data for licensed social work professionals.

Workforce Composition and Employment Patterns

Despite inconsistent data collection, several trends are well established.

Strong Growth Across Sectors. BLS (2025) projects a 6% increase in social work employment from 2024 to 2034. Growth is uneven across areas of specialized practice:

Sector	Projected Growth (%)
Overall Social Work Employment	6
Child, Family, and School	3
Healthcare	8
Mental Health and Substance Use	10
Behavioral Health	15

Note. Employment data from BLS (2025). Practice area data from the Health Resources and Services Administration (2023).

These projections align with the Health Resources and Services Administration’s (HRSA) national workforce modeling (HRSA, 2023), which shows especially rapid growth for behavioral health social workers.

Recent workforce data indicate that three primary groups—child, family, and school social workers; healthcare social workers; and mental health and substance use social workers—comprise approximately 90% of the social work profession. These groups also represent the majority of licensed professionals with MSW degrees (Kim, 2025c).

According to the most recent ASWB workforce reports (Kim, 2025a, 2025c), licensed social workers with social work degrees are predominantly employed in healthcare settings, with clinical social workers especially concentrated in outpatient and private practice roles. Clinical social workers tend to work fewer hours and weeks, suggesting greater job flexibility, and a significant portion are self-employed or work as independent contractors. However, a notable percentage (31% of clinical; 25% of master's-level social workers) hold multiple jobs, many of them part-time, which may reflect financial or career limitations in their primary employment.

Bachelor-level social workers most commonly serve clients needing assistance with daily living (36%) or are involved in child welfare (31%). Across all licensure levels, fewer than 1% of social workers identified their primary roles as community organizers or researchers. Clinical social workers were most likely to provide direct services (65%), while 41.8% of bachelor's-level workers primarily served as case managers. Other roles included administrators, service coordinators, and supervisors.

Social workers are employed across a range of sectors. Individual and family services represent the largest share of the workforce at 17%, followed by local government at 14% and state government at 12%. Educational services account for 9% of employment, while community food and housing, emergency relief, and vocational rehabilitation services collectively make up 3% (BLS, 2025).

The largest share of social workers across all license levels were employed in the private, nonprofit sector (31–41%). Clinical social workers were more likely to be self-employed (26%), whereas bachelor's-level social workers were more frequently employed by state (24.89%) or local (12.40%) government agencies (Kim, 2025c).

The ASWB survey (Kim, 2025c) also revealed differences in electronic practice. Fourteen percent of clinical social workers reported conducting all of their practice electronically, compared with 8.6% of advanced generalist, 6.7% of master's-level, and 5.5% of bachelor's-level social workers. Additionally, about 35% of both clinical and bachelor's-level social workers reported engaging in electronic practice at least half the time.

Workforce Shortages

Multiple studies identify the U.S. behavioral health system as facing a severe shortage of qualified providers. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2020), HRSA (2023), and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2025) all report that the gap between demand and supply is widening, especially in rural regions.

Because social workers comprise the largest share of the nation's behavioral health workforce (NASW, 2025), shortages in mental health roles have direct implications for MSW program curricula, field site capacity, and specialized offerings within social work education programs.

Federal policy changes, especially budget reductions in the National Institutes of Health, the National Institute of Mental Health, SAMHSA, and the U.S. Department of Education, pose emerging risks to the social work workforce pipeline.

Potential impacts include:

- reduced field placement capacity in federal agencies and federally contracted programs
- weakened partnerships between universities and federal service systems, affecting applied research, training grants, and evaluation opportunities
- a shift toward community-based and private-sector placements, requiring new training in billing, integrated care, and managed care systems
- reduced federal hiring, particularly in healthcare, behavioral health, and education settings, diminishing stable employment pathways for new graduates.

These shifts may also accelerate privatization trends in behavioral health and child welfare, further altering the practice landscape.

The Social Work Education Continuum: BSW, MSW, DSW, and PhD

Social work education unfolds along a structured continuum, spanning the BSW, MSW, DSW, and PhD degree levels in social work. Each level of this continuum builds on the preceding one, preparing graduates for increasingly specialized roles, from foundational practice to advanced clinical, leadership, and research-oriented responsibilities.

Social Work Degrees Continuum				
	Baccalaureate (BSW)	Master's (MSW)	Practice Doctorate (DSW)	Research Doctorate (PhD)
Focus	Generalist social work practice	Specialized practice	Practitioner-scholar; leadership in practice or education	Research, theory development, academia
Career Path	Entry-level social work practice, such as case management	Specialized social work practice, such as clinical, administrative, policy	Leadership, academia, program development, applied research	Academia, research, policy development
Curriculum	Generalist practice social work	Generalist and specialized practice social work	Core expertise and skills preparing practitioner-scholar	Research methods, theory, policy, social work-related research
Requirement	Complete field practicum	Complete field practicum	Final Academic Product (defined by DSW program)	Dissertation (original research)
Program Length (on average)	4 years	2 years; 1 year advanced standing	3–4 years	4–7 years

Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)

- undergraduate degree
- first professional degree in social work
- provides foundational knowledge in social work practice, theory, ethics, and research
- purpose: prepares students for entry-level generalist practice social work positions
- focus: generalist social work practice, including working with individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations, with a practice perspective informed by anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI); emphasizes ethics, social justice, cultural competence, and professional value.

Master of Social Work (MSW)

- graduate degree (earned after a BSW or a non-social-work bachelor's degree)
- builds upon BSW knowledge and provides specialized training in social work practice, policy, clinical practice, and research
- offers specialization in an area of practice, such as clinical practice, social policy, community practice, or administration
- purpose: prepares students for advanced social work practice in specialized areas such as clinical social work, social work administration, or policy analysis
- focus: in-depth understanding of social work theory, research methods, social welfare policy, and specialized areas of practice (e.g., behavioral health, healthcare, child welfare, community practice, policy advocacy) with an ADEI-informed practice perspective.

Practice Doctorate in Social Work (DSW)

- practice doctorate degree; admission requires MSW and two or more years post-MSW practice experience
- prepares practitioner-scholars to advance their practice and innovate at the micro, mezzo, and/or macro levels of social work practice
- commonly designed for individuals seeking to elevate their professional practice, lead organizations, or improve the effectiveness of social programs and services
- purpose: develops expert practitioner-scholars who will lead in fields such as social work practice and education, administration, or policy
- focus: applied knowledge in social work leadership, clinical practice, teaching, and/or program development; integrating research and theory into professional practice to address real-world challenges.

Research Doctorate in Social Work (PhD)

- doctoral degree, typically post-master's degree; however, not required for all programs
- primarily research-focused, preparing students for research, academic, or policy-oriented careers
- aims to contribute to the development of social work theory, practice, and knowledge through scientific research, the development of evidence-based practices, and randomized clinical trials of social work interventions
- purpose: prepares students for careers in research, academia, or policy
- focus: generating new knowledge through research, developing social work theory, and advancing the profession through scholarly work; prepares students for roles in research, teaching, and policymaking.

Growth in Prevalence and Demand for the DSW Degree

In 2025, the Council on Higher Education Accreditation granted CSWE the authority to accredit practice doctorate programs. CSWE's Board of Accreditation requires accredited DSW programs to admit students who already hold an MSW and two years of post-MSW practice experience. This requirement signals the importance of the MSW degree in preparation of specialized practitioners, and in ensuring that practice doctorate program graduates prepare practitioner-scholars to advance practice and innovate at the micro, mezzo, and/or macro levels as well as in higher education and/or professional leadership (CSWE, 2025d).

DSW graduates are employed across various sectors, leveraging their advanced clinical, teaching, and leadership skills. Many social workers with a DSW work in clinical practice, taking on advanced roles in mental health services and specializing in evidence-based interventions. Others pursue academic positions, serving as faculty members or administrators in higher education institutions, where they educate and mentor future social workers.

Many DSW professionals occupy leadership positions within social service organizations and public administration, where they oversee program development and implementation. In addition, some graduates specialize in policy analysis and advocacy, conducting applied research to inform and shape social policies. These varied career trajectories underscore the versatility of the DSW degree in addressing complex social challenges.

As a professional doctorate, the DSW differs from a traditional research-focused doctoral degree (PhD) by emphasizing the advancement of practice and the preparation of practitioners for roles in direct service, administration, and applied research. While the social work workforce has historically prioritized BSW- and MSW-prepared graduates for generalist and specialized positions and PhD-prepared professionals for research-intensive roles, the growing presence of DSW-trained practitioners could reshape these workforce patterns, particularly in higher education. With its focus on leadership, innovation, and evidence-informed practice, the DSW equips graduates to bridge the gap between practice and research, exerting influence on policy development, organizational leadership, and advanced clinical care in novel and meaningful ways.

BSW and MSW Degree Demand and Workforce Context

As the social work profession evolves, practitioners must develop the skills necessary to effectively serve diverse populations, engage with emerging technologies, and advocate for systemic change. To prepare future social workers for the complex challenges and opportunities of the coming decades, social work education and professional development programs must prioritize the cultivation of these competencies.

The BSW and MSW degrees are utilized differently across the United States, reflecting diverse needs and professional requirements. In many rural and underserved areas, particularly in the South and Midwest, the BSW degree often serves as the entry-level qualification for social work positions. Here, BSW graduates typically work in direct service roles, such as case management, child welfare, and community outreach (Meng & Gray, 2026). These regions may rely more heavily on BSW-trained social workers due

to workforce shortages and the high demand for services in areas with limited access to MSW programs.

In contrast, urban centers and states with higher population densities, such as California, New York, and Massachusetts, often require an MSW for advanced clinical positions and specialized roles in healthcare, mental health, and administrative capacities (CSWE, 2025c). MSW degrees are particularly valued in these regions for their emphasis on clinical skills, specialized practice, and leadership training. Consequently, social workers with an MSW in these areas can access a broader range of job opportunities and are often required for positions that involve clinical assessment, diagnosis, and psychotherapy.

Salary disparities between BSW and MSW holders are notable but vary by region. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023), the median annual wage for social workers was \$51,760, but those with an MSW generally earn higher salaries than their BSW counterparts. On average, social workers earn \$60,595 per year, or \$29.13 per hour, in the United States. Social workers in the bottom 10% make roughly \$42,464 a year, while the top 10% make \$79,830. MSW graduates earn over \$13,000 more than BSW holders, while PhD/DSW holders earn \$20,000–\$25,000 more than MSWs. Location affects how much a social worker can expect to make. Social workers make the most in Washington, California, New York, and Illinois (NASW, 2026).

Student loan debt is a consideration for social work students. The average student loan debt for social workers is substantial, reflecting the extended educational requirements for those pursuing an MSW. Reports indicate that social workers graduate with an average of \$30,000 of debt for a BSW and an average of \$40,000 for an MSW, depending on the institution and whether they attended in-state or out-of-state programs (CSWE, 2025c). These financial burdens highlight the importance of scholarships and loan forgiveness programs, which are critical for sustaining a diverse and well-qualified social work workforce across the United States.

Pressures related to education affordability intersect with emerging federal policy debates around the classification of professional degrees. As of this writing, negotiated rulemaking at the Department of Education has proposed a new definition of *professional degree* that would exclude social work and include consequences for annual and lifetime federal student loan limits, access to Graduate PLUS loans, and other forms of aid that many social work students depend on (CSWE, 2026). Excluding social work from the professional degree category could disproportionately affect students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, and may also affect federal definitions used in research, training, and workforce funding. Beyond financing, reclassifying social work as a nonprofessional degree may shape how prospective students, families, and institutional leaders perceive the status and long-term value of social work careers. Monitoring and responding to these policy developments will be important for sustaining a diverse social work pipeline (e.g., BSW to MSW) and aligning educational financing with the profession's workforce needs.

Licensure of the Social Work Workforce

Social work licensure is regulated at the state or territory level. Licensing serves to protect the public by establishing and maintaining professional standards. To obtain a social work license, applicants must complete an accredited social work degree, pass required examinations, and fulfill specific criteria, such as supervised work experience.

Licensing requirements and types vary by location (i.e., state or territory) and license category. Recent research by the ASWB found substantial alignment between the content of the master’s licensing exam and the CSWE EPAS, with all nine EPAS competencies represented across the applied knowledge statements that inform the exam blueprint (Dunami et al., 2026).

Across the United States, licensing requirements may include specific educational credentials, examinations, and supervised experience. Licensing categories generally define different scopes of practice. The licensed bachelor social worker typically requires a BSW and allows for entry-level generalist practice, often under supervision. The licensed master social worker requires an MSW and permits a broader scope of practice than a BSW-level license, including more independent case management and assessment roles. The licensed clinical social worker requires an MSW or a DSW, along with postdegree supervised clinical experience, and allows for the independent practice of psychotherapy and other clinical services.

Currently, 40 states have licensing requirements for social workers with a baccalaureate degree (ASWB, n.d.). All other states require licensing for those with an MSW and/or a DSW degree. Many states also offer clinical licensure based on requisite minimum hours of supervised work experience completed after earning an MSW or a DSW.

Social workers licensed in one state or territory may be eligible for licensure reciprocity in another. While the specific process varies by state or territory, it generally includes an expedited licensing procedure, where an active license in good standing from one state or territory is recognized as meeting the licensure requirements of the new state or territory.

A current initiative with the potential to affect workforce trends in social work across the United States is the Interstate Licensure Compact for Social Work, which is supported by the Department of Defense (to enhance licensure portability) and particularly benefits military families and clinicians practicing via telehealth. This compact is led by the Council of State Governments, ASWB, NASW, and Clinical Social Work Association (NASW, 2026)

Implications for Future Workforce Development

The social work profession is poised to meet the complex and dynamic needs of society. Several key trends and developments will shape its trajectory, ensuring that social workers are equipped to address emerging challenges.

Integration of Technology and Digital Tools

As discussed throughout this report, advancements in technology are transforming many aspects of social work practice. The ASWB workforce study (Kim, 2025a) shows rapid growth in electronic practice; 14% of clinical social workers practice exclusively electronically, and 35% of both BSW and clinical social workers perform at least half their work electronically.

Digital tools, including telehealth, electronic health records, remote monitoring, AI-assisted documentation, and virtual case management, are now standard. Telehealth, virtual counseling, applications, and digital case management systems are becoming standard tools, enhancing access to services, especially in remote and underserved areas. Social workers will need to develop proficiency in digital literacy, including the use of teletherapy platforms, electronic health records, and online

Social work is being reshaped by technology, behavioral health demands, and policy shifts affecting funding and degree status—and education must catch up across all degree levels.

resource databases (CSWE, 2025a). Additionally, emerging technologies such as AI and machine learning could support predictive analytics in identifying at-risk populations and optimizing service delivery (CSWE, 2025a). Workforce readiness increasingly requires explicit digital literacy and ethical competence training, implying a need for stronger technology integration across EPAS competencies.

Emphasis on Trauma-Informed and Resilience-Based Practices

There is a growing recognition of the impact of trauma on individuals and communities. Future social work practice will increasingly integrate trauma-informed care, which emphasizes safety, trustworthiness, and empowerment. Resilience-based approaches are also likely to gain prominence, focusing on enhancing individuals' strengths and coping mechanisms rather than solely addressing deficits. Training in these areas will be essential for social workers to effectively support clients and communities dealing with complex trauma and adversity (SAMHSA, 2014).

Advancement in Mental Health and Substance Use Services

With rising rates of mental health issues and substance use disorders, there will be a heightened demand for social workers skilled in these areas (American Psychological Association, 2024). The profession is likely to see greater integration of mental health services into primary care settings and other healthcare environments. Social workers will need advanced training in evidence-based therapeutic interventions, crisis intervention, and integrated care models. This includes a stronger focus on collaborative care models, in which social workers work alongside healthcare professionals to provide holistic, client-centered care (SAMHSA, 2014; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025).

Continue Being a Voice to Connect People and Resources

Social workers will play a crucial role in advocating for change. Future social work education and practice will place a greater emphasis on preparing social workers to address inequalities and advocate for policies that promote fairness. This includes training in policy analysis, community organizing, and legislative advocacy to empower social workers to influence social policy and drive systemic change. Additionally, practitioners need to be prepared to design and strengthen corporate social responsibility strategies that enhance employee wellbeing and community outcomes. Data-driven advocacy skills are also essential, enabling social workers to analyze organizational metrics, identify inequities, and promote informed policy change. Effective stakeholder engagement further equips professionals to facilitate dialogue among employees, community members, and investors. Finally, developing negotiation and influence skills allows social workers to navigate corporate culture and encourage decision-makers to adopt socially just practices, including equitable wage policies (Reamer, 2024).

Expansion of Global and Cross-Cultural Competence

As discussed earlier, globalization and increasing migration patterns are expanding the scope of social work practice (Pentaris & Walker, 2025). Social workers need to develop competencies in global and cross-cultural practice, understanding the nuances of different cultural contexts and international social issues. This includes training in human rights and peace, international social work, and culturally competent practice, enabling social workers to work effectively with diverse populations across borders (Pentaris & Walker, 2025).

Integration of Environmental and Climate Justice

Environmental issues and climate change are increasingly recognized as critical factors affecting social well-being (Clayton & Swim, 2025). Social workers will need to incorporate environmental and climate justice into their practice, advocating for sustainable practices and supporting communities affected by environmental degradation. This involves understanding the intersection of environmental issues with social justice, promoting policies that protect vulnerable populations from the impacts of climate change, and integrating sustainability into social work interventions (Nagoshi et al., 2025).

Lifelong Learning and Adaptability

Given the rapid pace of change in societal needs and technological advancements, a commitment to lifelong learning will be essential for social workers. Continuing education, professional development, and adaptability to new knowledge and skills will be crucial. This will include staying updated on best practices, engaging in reflective practice, and pursuing advanced certifications and training to enhance their expertise and effectiveness in addressing emerging challenges (Budayová et al., 2022). Social work education must therefore integrate these skills across BSW, MSW, and DSW curricula, with special attention to field readiness and workforce shortages in high-need sectors.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research and Analysis

As noted, there are several limitations in the available data on the social work workforce. Markedly, no systematic or centralized method exists for collecting workforce data, resulting in fragmented and often dated information. The most current insights come from recent reports by the ASWB (Kim, 2025a, 2025b), which utilized analysis of workforce surveys from a social work census of more than 39,000 social workers. While additional data sources exist, such as those from HRSA, BLS, and other federal agencies, these often underestimate the size and scope of the social work workforce and may misrepresent key employment and demographic characteristics (Lombardi et al., 2024). To better inform social work education, practice trends, and curriculum development, the profession must prioritize the creation of a consistent, ongoing system for collecting comprehensive workforce data.

Considerations

Emerging trends across the workforce point to a need for new and reinforcing education in areas such as technological integration, mental health specialization, environmental and climate justice, trauma-informed care, policy advocacy, aging populations, global and transnational social work, and equity and inclusion. Where possible, social work education should consider these trends when developing competencies and educational policies.

CSWE can support faculty development and practice partnerships that build capacity to teach and supervise in these evolving areas of practice. Further, our profession should continue to support BSW, MSW, and DSW degrees as core practice degrees that support employment and licensure across generalist and specialized practice, and to advance practice, with the PhD concentrating on research-intensive roles. As the practice doctorate expands, it will be essential for our profession to clarify expectations for preparation at the generalist (BSW), specialized (MSW), and practitioner-scholar (DSW) levels and to

articulate how each degree contributes to the workforce ecosystem, supporting programs in building coherent pathways from entry-level practice to advanced leadership.

Workforce data from multiple sources show strong employment growth for social workers alongside a persistent nationwide shortage that is more severe in some regions. The data offer an incomplete picture of workforce trends in social work. Given the way data are collected, many social workers may be missed. Data are more robust for MSW-level social workers, but fragmented for the BSW and DSW levels of practice. Social work and social work education should develop more robust data collection methods to determine the workforce issues, especially regarding BSW and DSW practice.

The areas of job growth in social work appear to be child and family services, healthcare, mental health and substance use, and rural practice. Emerging workforce trends may need to be addressed by social work education. Those trends include technological integration, mental health specialization, environmental and climate justice, trauma-informed care, policy advocacy, aging populations, global social work, and equity and inclusion.

Core Competencies for Future Practice

The evolving practice landscape requires social workers to develop multiple interconnected competencies that respond directly to emerging workforce trends. Consequently, future practitioners will need integrated bodies of knowledge and skills that cut across settings, populations, and roles. Accordingly, this environmental scan highlights the following areas as core foci for future social work education and practice.

Holistic and Person-Centered Approach

Despite evolving practice demands, social work’s fundamental commitment to holistic, person-centered care remains paramount, as reflected by our emphasis on the interaction between the person and their environment. Practitioners must continue employing strengths-based approaches that focus on clients’ assets and resources while integrating the physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions of well-being. This comprehensive approach to client empowerment remains essential for promoting positive outcomes in an increasingly complex practice environment.

Conclusion

The future of social work workforce development requires strategic alignment between evolving societal needs and educational preparation. By updating the EPAS to reflect these emerging workforce trends while maintaining the profession’s core values, social work can ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness in addressing complex social challenges.

TECHNICAL AND CLINICAL SKILLS

- Proficiency in digital tools including telehealth, electronic health records, and data management systems
- Advanced clinical assessment and intervention capabilities
- Ability to utilize standardized measures and evidence-based practices
- Competence in trauma-informed care delivery

INTERPERSONAL AND LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

- Effective collaboration within multidisciplinary teams
- Strong communication and leadership abilities
- Program management and client advocacy skills
- Cultural competence across diverse populations

ANALYTICAL AND ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES

- Critical-thinking and analytical skills for complex situation assessment
- Commitment to lifelong learning and reflective practice
- Ability to integrate new research and technologies into practice
- Environmental and global awareness for addressing contemporary challenges

The future of the social work profession will be shaped by its ability to adapt to new challenges and opportunities. PhD programs advance the science of social work, and the development of new knowledge and interventions for the field. DSW programs are expanding the profession's capacity for leadership and applied research. Meanwhile, MSW and BSW programs remain essential to workforce stability, particularly in underserved communities. By embracing technological advancements, enhancing trauma-informed practices, expanding mental health services, advocating for social justice, developing global competencies, addressing environmental issues, and committing to lifelong learning, social workers will continue to play a vital role in promoting individual and community well-being.

Addressing workforce needs across practice settings will require greater investment in technology readiness, clinical specialization, interprofessional collaboration, and equity-driven training. The profession's ongoing evolution will ensure that social workers are well prepared to meet the diverse and evolving needs of society. The 2029 EPAS revision and national workforce strategies must integrate these realities to ensure that social workers remain equipped to meet society's most pressing challenges with competence, compassion, and innovation.

Trends in Higher Education

Trends in U.S. higher education have a significant impact on the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). These trends influence the evolution of social work education, shaping curricula and training to address contemporary societal needs, adhere to evidence-based best practices, and prepare graduates for professional practice within a complex political landscape, including policy reforms, funding priorities, and regulatory changes that directly affect service delivery and social justice advocacy. They further influence such aspects as curriculum relevance, alignment with competency-based education, integration of technology and practice, emphasis on social work values and ethics, responsiveness to workforce needs, and global and interdisciplinary engagement.

Higher education faces converging pressures, including demands for clearer return on investment (ROI); expectations for competency-based and flexible learning models; a growing reliance on online and hybrid delivery; intensifying political scrutiny of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); interprofessional education; and the rapid expansion of microcredentials and alternative pathways.

For social work education, these dynamics intersect with long-standing professional values related to preparation for professional practice, ethics, and public accountability, creating both constraints and opportunities for social work programs. Several data sources contributed to this report, including the CSWE Annual Survey of Social Work Programs, the Directory of Accredited Programs, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Higher education's push for return on investment, flexibility, and microcredentials amid growing political pressures forces social work education to defend both its economic value and its core professional values simultaneously.

Career Relevance and ROI

Across higher education, students, families, and policymakers are increasingly framing college as an economic investment rather than a public good (Finley et al., 2021). Public confidence in the value of a degree has declined, particularly among younger adults and those without a college credential, with recent surveys showing substantial skepticism about whether the cost of college is "worth it," given wage outcomes and debt levels (Finley et al., 2021). In response, federal and state actors have intensified efforts to measure and publicize ROI.

At the federal level, the Department of Education has revived and expanded gainful-employment and financial-value-transparency regulations through the 2023 Financial Value Transparency and Gainful Employment rule, which requires institutions to report metrics and, for certain programs, meet thresholds related to debt-to-earnings ratios and earnings comparisons to typical high school graduates (Office of the Federal Register, 2023).

Additionally, these rules require institutions to label some offerings as *high debt burden* or *low-earning programs*. Program-level earnings and debt data are also increasingly

visible through tools such as the College Scorecard, which allow users to compare net price, earnings, and payback periods across institutions and fields of study. Regional accreditors and state systems are starting to integrate ROI indicators into accountability frameworks and dashboards, further normalizing financial value as an important lens for evaluating programs.

This environment creates both tension and opportunity around social work's commitment to public service and equitable access versus policy expectations that programs demonstrate strong wage outcomes relative to student loan debt. Without careful interpretation, ROI metrics risk penalizing social work programs that send graduates into critical but moderately paying public and nonprofit work.

For social work education, this environment heightens the importance of transparent communication about career pathways, integration of workforce-relevant skills in curricula, and partnerships that connect students to compensated practicum and early employment opportunities. The 2029 EPAS will need to acknowledge this policy context while articulating broader definitions of *value*, such as societal impact, workforce contribution in shortage areas, and alignment with social work's mission.

Competency-Based Education

Competency-based education (CBE) has become a prominent theme more broadly in higher education policy and practice, particularly in fields with licensure requirements. In fact, CSWE leadership represents the profession on a national competency-based education task force alongside more than a dozen other health professions from the Federation of Associations of Schools of the Health Professions. Many professions and institutions are grappling with, and experimenting with, models that allow students to progress based on demonstrated mastery rather than Carnegie Unit (Carnegie Foundation, n.d.) seat time, often through modularized curricula, direct assessment, and flexible pacing (Green & DeBruler, 2023).

Since 2008, social work education has adopted a competency framework through the EPAS. The majority of CSWE-accredited social work programs remain aligned with traditional credit-hour structures. Programs typically translate competencies into course objectives, assignments, and field evaluations, yet progression and completion are still defined by credit accumulation and time-based requirements rather than mastery alone. This hybrid model of competency-based education, which embeds competency language within a seat-time infrastructure, may limit the field's ability to adopt "true" CBE approaches, such as individualized pacing, competency-based transcripts, or stackable, mastery-validated learning pathways.

At the same time, external stakeholders, such as employers, regulators, and others, are interested in transparent demonstrations of specific skills (e.g., interprofessional collaboration, data literacy, trauma-informed practice, policy advocacy) rather than only degree titles (Watts-Isley et al., 2024). Whether the 2029 EPAS should advance toward more measurable competency expectations and assessment warrants careful examination, particularly in light of the regulatory constraints that bind social work education to credit-hour requirements, licensure standards, institutional funding structures, and student aid policies.

Flexibility, Affordability, and Working Learners

Demographic and economic trends are pushing institutions to redesign programs for working and caregiving students. Adult learners age 25 and older represent a substantial share of the postsecondary population, with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022) projecting continued growth among learners ages 25 and up, even as traditional-age enrollment levels off. Many of these students work full- or part-time, support dependents, and face material insecurity. Research on adult students documents situational (finance, time, caregiving), institutional (scheduling, advising, bureaucracy), and dispositional (self-doubt, reentry anxiety) barriers that constrain persistence in the absence of institutional support.

The most prominent transformation in higher education in recent years has been the substantial expansion of online and hybrid instructional modalities, reflecting both institutional adaptation and student demand for greater flexibility. By the 2022–23 academic year, more than half of postsecondary students in the United States were enrolled in at least one online course, indicating that online learning has become a sustained feature of the educational landscape rather than a temporary response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the proportion of students enrolled exclusively in online courses has risen significantly compared with prepandemic levels, underscoring the marked growth in demand for fully distance-based education (NCES, 2022). A growing proportion of adult undergraduates now enroll in fully online programs, frequently identifying the flexibility of online learning and citing that as a primary limitation in balancing academic responsibilities with work and family obligations, building a sense of community, and in accessing necessary technology and support. This duality underscores both the appeal and the challenges of online education for adult learners in contemporary higher education (Mansoor et al., 2024).

There are areas of alignment between students and institutions, including a desire for career-relevant education. Institutions surveyed indicated that 70% of administrators analyze course offerings for workforce alignment, and that 80% were likely to adjust curricula based on employer needs. The students surveyed indicated that 49% valued education for knowledge in a specific field (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Affordability remains central to higher education and social work education. Even where tuition has stabilized or declined in real terms, students confront rising living costs, limitations in grant aid, and complex debt landscapes. For social work, a field with many students who come from minoritized communities and enter modest-paying careers, flexibility and affordability are not optional features; they are structural conditions for access.

To improve student success among adult learners, colleges and universities are rethinking their approaches. Programs catering to adult learners are considering self-directed learning and the lived experience of students (Knowles et al., 2020). Accelerated programs, which emphasize shorter completion times, provide a structured yet flexible path to earning a degree. Many of these programs combine online and in-person learning, allowing students to balance their studies with other responsibilities. Block scheduling, wherein students attend classes at consistent times each week, helps them organize their commitments more effectively. Other studies suggest that adult learners benefit from transition programs, which help them adjust to college; prior learning assessment; and credit. These can increase degree completion, credit-transfer pathways, and flexibility in course scheduling, policies, and procedures (Koller, 2025).

Another key strategy is proactive advising, in which academic advisors take the lead in reaching out to students (Chamberlain & Burnside, 2021). Rather than waiting for students to seek help, advisors regularly check in, connect them with necessary resources, and advocate for their success. This personalized approach ensures that students are aware of deadlines, financial aid options, and career development services, ultimately increasing retention and completion rates.

Interprofessional Education

Across health and human service professions, interprofessional education (IPE) has moved from aspiration to expectation. The American Interprofessional Health Collaborative (2023) surveyed more than 100 leaders; 66% of respondents said more than three-quarters of students participated in IPE activities, and 92% said IPE was required for all or some students.

The Interprofessional Education Collaborative (2023) has articulated four core competencies—values and ethics, roles and responsibilities, interprofessional communication, and teams and teamwork—that provide a shared framework to achieve interprofessional collaborative practice. Public health accreditation standards explicitly require “intersectoral” learning experiences. The Council on Education for Public Health’s 2024 criteria include a foundational competency (D21) requiring graduates to “integrate perspectives from other sectors and/or professions to promote and advance population health,” and expect programs to demonstrate structured opportunities for students to engage across disciplines and sectors.

Social work programs already collaborate informally with allied disciplines in many institutions, but these efforts are uneven and often dependent on institutional or program champions. As health and human services shift toward team-based care, integrated behavioral health, and complex system responses (e.g., homelessness, climate-related disasters, community violence), the ability of social work graduates to function effectively in interprofessional teams and contexts becomes a necessity.

DEI, Academic Freedom, and Professional Values

As discussed previously, higher education is operating in a contested political environment related to human identities and characteristics, historical narratives, and social justice (see the section “Challenges to Social Work Education”). Numerous states have introduced legislation or enacted laws that restrict DEI offices, limit the use of public funds for DEI activities, mandate viewpoint neutrality, or place constraints on teaching about race, racism, sexuality, and other topics. Some measures explicitly target DEI staffing and training, while others create surveillance conditions (e.g., policies facilitating classroom recording and complaint processes) that have effects on faculty speech and curriculum.

For social work, this is of utmost importance for the future of our profession. Professional ethics and the 2022 EPAS (CSWE, 2022) explicitly commit programs to anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) as core competencies and as features of both implicit and explicit curricula. When state or institutional policies seek to limit content on structural racism, gender identity, reproductive justice, immigration, or LGBTQ+ lives, programs and individuals can be caught between professional obligations and political constraints. Even where formal exemptions for accreditation and academic freedom exist, faculty report self-censorship and concerns about retaliation, especially in states with highly publicized anti-DEI campaigns.

Microcredentialing

Microcredentials, digital badges, and short-form certificates now have a formal place in higher education. Microcredentials, digital badges, and short-form certificates have become formally embedded in higher education practice; national survey data indicate that a majority of institutions now integrate microcredential offerings into their program portfolios, with more than half currently providing them for academic credit and many others planning or piloting such initiatives as a strategic priority (Chadwick, 2024). Students and employers are increasingly receptive to shorter, skills-focused credentials that can be earned alongside or after a degree; many learners report that such credentials help them stand out in the job market and document specific capabilities beyond a general major.

In social work, microcredentials and certificates are emerging in areas such as school social work, trauma-informed practice, animal-assisted social work, substance use treatment, and aging. These can serve multiple purposes, including upskilling or reskilling current practitioners, creating entry points to social work education for paraprofessionals or other community workers, and providing specialized competencies in high-demand areas without requiring an additional full degree.

The proliferation of unregulated microcredentials may raise questions about quality assurance, equity of access, and potential stratification, such as lower-income students being steered into cheaper short credentials in place of degrees. While accreditation of microcredentials falls beyond the purview of the EPAS, social work education should consider how these microcredentials may fit into the larger social work practice community, and clarify the value proposition of microcredentials. For example, do they function as structured post-baccalaureate certificates aligned with EPAS competencies, as stackable components of MSW curricula, or as continuing education guided by social work values and standards?

Conclusion

Trends in higher education are pushing institutions toward more explicit accountability for economic outcomes, more flexible program structures, deeper interprofessional collaboration, and new credentialing models. This is all in a context of heightened political scrutiny of DEI and academic freedom. For social work education, these forces directly affect program funding, curricula, evaluation of student outcomes, and what kinds of learning experiences are possible.

The 2029 EPAS will need to navigate this landscape while upholding the purpose and values of the profession. That means integrating competency-based rigor, flexibility for working learners, interprofessional readiness, ADEI commitments, and thoughtful engagement with microcredentials, while continuing to assert that the ultimate measure of social work education is its contribution to justice, well-being, and the capacity of communities to thrive.

Trends in Social Work Education

Student trends in social work education reflect broader shifts in higher education while also revealing discipline-specific needs tied to professional identity, field education, and workforce demands. Social work students bring diverse lived experiences and increasingly aim to balance school with employment, caregiving, and financial needs. At the same time, social work education programs are navigating changing enrollment patterns, shifting student demographics in some degree levels, demand for flexible delivery models, and increased student support needs beyond the classroom. Understanding these trends is essential for informing the 2029 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), particularly in relation to flexibility, adult learners, field education, and student well-being.

Knowledge Sources

This section draws on multiple data sources and types of evidence, including data from focus groups with Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) constituents and CSWE's 2023–24 Annual Survey of Social Work Programs (CSWE, 2025c), which provides national data on enrollment, demographics, program delivery, field education, and graduation patterns across BSW, MSW, DSW, and PhD programs. Scholarly and practice-based literature was analyzed for information on adult learners, field education models (including employment-based and paid placements), and the mental health and well-being of social work students. Together, these sources offer a composite picture of who social work students are, how they move through programs, and what supports and structural changes are needed to promote their success.

Enrollment and Demographic Trends in Social Work Education

CSWE's 2023–24 Annual Survey of Social Work Program in the United States (CSWE, 2025c) reveals that social work education continues to serve a large and diverse student body, with some differences by degree level.

BSW Students

The 2023–24 CSWE report shows that BSW education remains sizable and diverse. Across 374 BSW programs, there were 39,647 students enrolled and 13,045 graduates in 2022–23. A majority of BSW students were women (about 86% female), and just under half identified as White (non-Hispanic), with significant representation of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. Age distributions confirm that BSW cohorts remain comparatively young (about 40% under age 22), but roughly one-third of students are 25 or older, reflecting the presence of adult learners even at the baccalaureate level.

MSW Students

The 2023–24 CSWE data represented 55,935 MSW students enrolled in 225 master's programs, with 21,092 MSW degrees conferred in 2022–23. MSW students are primarily

women (about 81% female), and the racial and ethnic composition parallels BSW: majority White (non-Hispanic), with Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students as the next largest groups. Age distributions indicate that MSW education is firmly an adult-learner space: Roughly half of MSW students are age 30 or older, with notable shares in the 35–44 and 45+ categories.

DSW Students

Doctoral social work education remains relatively small but is growing and highly concentrated among midcareer practitioners and scholars. In 2023–24, eight DSW programs reported a total of 1,614 students enrolled and 241 graduates from 2022–23; nearly 60% of DSW students were enrolled part-time, and the majority had already completed their coursework, underscoring how these programs are structured around working professionals.

DSW enrollment is also notably diverse. Almost half of students identified as Black/African American, about one-third as White (non-Hispanic), and more than four-fifths as women, with most students between ages 35 and 44, reflecting the profession's efforts to create advanced practice pathways for experienced practitioners of color.

PhD Students

In contrast, 52 PhD programs enrolled 1,404 students in 2023–24 and awarded 233 degrees in 2022–2023, with roughly three-quarters of students studying full-time and nearly half in the 35–44 age range, indicating a primarily full-time, mid-career scholarly pipeline.

PhD programs show a different demographic profile than DSW programs. Nearly half of enrolled students are White (non-Hispanic), followed by Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students, and women account for about 59% of total enrollment.

Taken together, these data show that social work education is increasingly adult-learner-oriented; especially at the MSW level, we see implications for delivery models, scheduling, and financial structures. Practice doctorate data suggest that DSW programs are functioning as advanced, practice-oriented degrees for a racially diverse, predominantly part-time practitioner cohort, whereas PhD programs remain more traditional research degrees with a more heavily full-time, majority-White student body, both of which have implications for leadership, faculty diversification, and the research–practice interface in social work. Given the growth of DSW programs nationally and the implementation of CSWE accreditation at the practice doctorate level, doctoral-level student data will be closely monitored in the coming years.

Flexibility, Affordability, and Workforce Alignment

As higher education continues to evolve, institutions are witnessing significant shifts in student enrollment patterns, motivations, and challenges. The landscape is shaped by both traditional students fresh out of high school and a growing population of adult learners balancing work, family, and education. Understanding these trends is essential for colleges and universities aiming to adapt to changing student expectations and provide meaningful support.

Perhaps today's prospective students approach college with a renewed sense of optimism, believing that a degree will enhance their career prospects as they are driven by financial incentives, and viewing higher education as a pathway to higher salaries and

economic security. However, despite their enthusiasm, many students feel unprepared for the demands of college (Hall, 2023). Concerns about self-motivation, study skills, time management, communication, and collaboration abilities are increasingly common.

At the same time, navigating the college application process remains a challenge for many. Limited familiarity with admissions requirements, financial aid applications, and academic expectations can create barriers to enrollment. Yet, despite these uncertainties, students remain clear about what they want: a full-time, in-person college experience, ideally within a few hours of home. Digital communication remains their preferred mode of interaction with institutions, but they are showing less reliance on social media for gathering college-related information.

Certain groups are more likely to pursue higher education than others. Non-first-generation students and those who identify as female are among the most committed to continuing their education (Hurst, 2024; Wright et al., 2023). When making enrollment decisions, students prioritize practical outcomes. They want assurance that their education will lead to stable employment, financial security, and opportunities for professional growth. Affordability, financial aid availability, and tuition assistance play a significant role in their decision-making, along with the reputation of academic programs, the quality of professors, and the level of career support services available. For students of color, financial stability is a key motivator, with many viewing higher education as a means to improve their earning potential. Among academic programs, psychology continues to attract the highest level of interest.

Adult Learners, Flexibility, and Affordability

Adult learners, commonly defined as students ages 25 and older, constitute approximately one-third of undergraduates nationally and a significant proportion of MSW students (Bárány, Corblet, & Buchinsky, 2024; CSWE, 2025c). To social work, they bring prior careers, caregiving responsibilities, and lived experiences, many of which align closely with the profession's mission.

While much of the conversation around student success focuses on younger learners, adult students make up approximately one-third of all undergraduate students, according to research from the Brookings Institute (Bárány, Corblet, & Buchinsky, 2024). Yet their unique needs and challenges often go unaddressed. Black/African American, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native students enroll in higher education as adult learners at higher rates than other groups, highlighting the increasing diversity within this segment.

The enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions of students under the age of 25 is projected to increase 2% between 2019 and 2030 to 13.3 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Enrollment of students in degree-granting postsecondary institutions who are 25 to 34 years old decreased 13% between 2009 and 2019 (4.5 million to 4.0 million). That number is projected to be 4% higher in 2030 (4.1 million) than in 2019. Student enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions of students ages 35 years and older decreased 24% between 2009 and 2019 (3.3 million to 2.6 million). That number is projected to increase 18% between 2019 and 2030, to 3.0 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Unlike traditional students, many adult learners attend college part-time, with more than half enrolling in two-year public institutions. Their schedules are often dictated by work

and family responsibilities—nearly half work full-time while completing their degrees, while another quarter balance part-time jobs with coursework.

The challenges they face are distinct and often layered, including situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers (Osam et al., 2017). Financial constraints, a situational barrier, are a primary concern, as many adult learners do not have access to parental financial support and must fund their education independently. Key stressors included financial insecurity (77%), job instability (60%), food insecurity (59%), and housing insecurity (50%). Time is another major barrier. Finding a sustainable balance between work, family, and coursework is a constant struggle. Institutions can affect persistence through implementation of course schedules, admissions, and advising. Adult students experience dispositional barriers related to their reactions to the learning environment. All of these issues can affect student persistence, with the National Student Clearinghouse (2024) noting that students who start college at 21 persist at rates 30% lower than students who begin college younger than 20.

Increasingly, social work students are adults juggling jobs, caregiving, debt, and their own mental health.

Adult learners may therefore require additional education and support in using digital learning platforms, particularly in online or hybrid programs, which are increasing in social work education. To increase success for adult learners in social work education, social work programs may need flexible learning options, such as online courses, evening classes, and part-time programs; supportive learning environments that include mentorship, peer support groups, and faculty guidance; field practicum experiences that may be paid or part of their existing work environment; resilience building to assist with the emotional demands of social work, stress management, and self-care.

Field Education: Employment-Based and Pay-for-Placement Models

Field education is a critical site where student trends intersect with workforce realities and structural inequities. Adult learners, first-generation students, and students from lower-income backgrounds are disproportionately harmed by unpaid or inflexible field placements, especially when they already juggle employment and caregiving.

The 2023–24 CSWE report on social work education in the United States (2025c) documents growing use of employment-based field placements and varied forms of financial support:

- At the BSW level, more than 1,200 students completed employment-based placements, and programs reported providing stipends, travel support, and other financial assistance to reduce the burden of field education.
- At the MSW level, more than 6,000 students were in employment-based placements, indicating that a sizable share of graduate students is integrating field learning with existing jobs in social service settings.

Programs at both levels also reported multiple mechanisms for field support, including stipends, tuition assistance tied to agencies, and other pay-for-placement approaches.

These patterns suggest that social work students are seeking field models that do not require them to exit the labor market. Employment-based and pay-for-placement models have the potential to reduce financial strain but also raise questions about gatekeeping, supervision quality, and equity. Traditional stand-alone, unpaid field placements are

increasingly untenable for many students, particularly women, caregivers, and students of color, who are more likely to experience financial hardship (Farr, 2024).

Field education policy and accreditation expectations will need to continue supporting high-quality, equity-focused employment-based and paid placement models while maintaining clear competency expectations and robust supervision structures.

Mental Health Needs of Social Work Students

According to Anand (2024), an increasing number of MSW students face mental health challenges, including mild symptoms of anxiety, bouts of loneliness, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and even severe mental health disorders, such as depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. Harvard's Graduate School of Education found that 36% of young adults (ages 18 to 25) have anxiety, and 29% have depression (Mowreader, 2023).

Some social work educators support individuals with mental health issues entering the social work profession, as they may have insights that help clients achieve their mental health goals (Holley et al., 2022). Anderson et al. (2025) recommend that social work educators address the adverse life events of students should be viewed in a balanced manner, as both a risk factor and a potential benefit for being in a helping profession.

Faculty in social work education have a unique role to play in addressing the needs of social work students who are dealing with mental health issues. Should faculty be expected to handle these mental health challenges by extending support beyond the confines of classroom teaching? According to Anand (2024), educators and fieldwork supervisors play a significant role in identifying and supporting students with mental health challenges by providing a safe, confidential, and nonjudgmental atmosphere.

More research is needed on how programs in social work address the need to manage students' mental health issues. Holley et al. (2022) found that schools managed mental-health-related issues in various ways to support student graduation, and about half the programs pointed out that students were disenrolled due to mental-health-related issues. Useful interventions for assisting students experiencing mental health issues included access to mental health services, support and flexibility from faculty, regular and clear communication, and less field hours required during the pandemic (Christensen et al., 2023).

In her study of BSW and MSW students, Lyter (2021) found a higher level of adverse childhood experiences and recommended that social work curricula should include trauma-informed assets to foster resilience and growth. In a qualitative study of online social work students (Singh & MacDonald, 2022), students requested that their programs provide mental health support, without which they found themselves struggling "through their assignments in times when they were unwell, silently suffering while their work failed to represent their full capacities" (p. 523).

Social work students face the dual demands of rigorous coursework and field placements, where they work with clients and communities experiencing stress and trauma. These professional and academic pressures, combined with personal responsibilities, can contribute to mental health challenges. Depression may be premorbid or arise in response to the demands of social work education and field experiences, as exposure to clients' complex needs and performance expectations places significant strain on students' well-being (Gant et al., 2025).

In social work education, promoting social workers' self-care is essential to ensuring that they can effectively meet the needs of the populations they serve. Integrated behavioral healthcare training for social work students can involve adaptations to field education curricula (Reitmeier et al., 2023). Encouraging students to practice emotional and mindfulness self-care may lead to a higher quality of life for MSW students; self-care in the curriculum was also important to student success (Livingston et al., 2022; Nicotera et al., 2023).

In dealing with social work students' mental health issues, educators should be aware of the possible stressors in a student's life, such as life circumstances, family circumstances, and community circumstances (Campbell et al., 2024). Social work students also require reassurance that if they disclose their mental health issues, they will not experience stigmatization or marginalization in the classroom.

Conclusion

Trends in social work education indicate that the traditional full-time, residential student aged 18–22 no longer represents the majority of enrollees. Across all program levels, students increasingly include adult learners, many of whom must balance employment with caregiving and educational responsibilities and contend with issues of affordability. Concurrently, many social work students experience substantial mental health challenges while preparing to enter a profession characterized by exposure to trauma, crisis, and structural injustice.

CSWE data from the 2023–24 social work education report (2025c) show that programs are already adapting through flexible delivery models, employment-based field education, and various forms of financial and academic support. The challenge for the 2029 EPAS is not to add on student support as a separate concern, but to integrate student realities into the core logic of the EPAS: Who our students are, what they juggle, and what they need to persist and thrive must shape expectations for curricula, field education, and the implicit curriculum.

Social Work Academia in an Era of Change

As legislative changes continue at the federal and state levels, and workplace cultures are pressured by economic, political, and organizational forces, social work academia must navigate a turbulent landscape while maintaining its commitment to social justice, human rights, and professional excellence. This moment calls for intentional alignment of curricula, accreditation standards, and advocacy so that social work education can both withstand external pressures and equip graduates for real-world practice settings.

The Disruption of Knowledge

The generation and dissemination of social work knowledge depend on multiple interconnected systems, each now facing significant disruption. Social work education policies and standards embody society's commitment to addressing social problems through value- and evidence-based professional interventions. Yet new legislation, actions, and interpretation of evidence reflect a redefinition in societal values that often conflicts with social work's long-standing principles.

When we examine the sources of knowledge that inform social work practice and education, we see a complex ecosystem vulnerable to political shifts and economic pressures. Research universities, community-based practice settings, policy institutes, and professional organizations all contribute to the knowledge base that shapes curricula and practice. Disruption to any component of this ecosystem reverberates throughout the profession.

Research funding cuts; changes to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) laws; student debt; and toxic internal cultures are converging on social work education and pressure the very values the profession is built to defend.

The Political Landscape: Anti-DEI Legislation and Project 2025

Anti-DEI Laws

Since 2023, a significant wave of anti-DEI legislation has swept across the United States, primarily targeting public colleges, universities, and state agencies. As of July 2025, 28 anti-DEI bills have become law (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2025b), and 22 states have passed a total of 20 anti-DEI laws (Haynes et al., 2025). Beyond enacted laws, at the time of writing, 78 bills in 23 states are being tracked (Kramer, 2025). These bills generally ensure that no state funds are spent on DEI programs and prohibit the use of DEI in state agencies, local governments, schools, higher education institutions, public boards, and public healthcare systems.

Anti-DEI laws typically focus on four main areas:

- eliminating DEI offices and staff at public institutions
- banning mandatory diversity training for employees and students
- prohibiting diversity statements in hiring, admissions, and promotion processes
- restricting identity-based considerations in employment, admissions, and funding decisions.

Some legislation also prohibits requiring courses that address concepts such as systemic racism or gender diversity to be graduation requirements.

At the time of writing, the states that have passed anti-DEI legislation include Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Iowa's law is considered the most restrictive on DEI on college campuses (Kramer, 2025). Texas leads in legislative activity, with 10 bills introduced and three laws passed, followed by Missouri, with 15 bills introduced (Haynes et al., 2025), though Missouri has not yet passed any into law.

Initially focused on public institutions, the legislation is expanding. Some bills now target public contractors and entities receiving state funds, while state attorneys general are pressuring private companies to reconsider their DEI programs.

Project 2025

Much of the legislative changes are based on Project 2025, a 922-page policy document created by the Heritage Foundation and other stakeholders that outlines recommendations for reshaping government and federal higher education policy (Dans & Groves, 2023).

Project 2025 calls for dismantling the Department of Education and redistributing responsibility for federal education programs across multiple agencies. It recommends ending federal student loan programs, including income-driven repayment plans and Public Service Loan Forgiveness. Under these proposals, all student lending would be privatized, and any loan forgiveness would occur only at the discretion of the Department of Education.

Project 2025 calls for the systematic removal of DEI-related language by “deleting references to sexual orientation, gender identity, diversity, equity, and inclusion, gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender awareness, gender-sensitive, abortion, reproductive health, [and] reproductive rights ... out of every agency regulation, contract, grant, and piece of legislation that exists” (Dans & Groves, 2023, pp. 4–5).

According to Project 2025, individuals and communities should rely more heavily on themselves to solve problems rather than addressing the systemic and structural factors that have contributed to differences and suffering. This ideological stance directly contradicts social work's foundational commitment to addressing structural oppression and inequality (Dans & Groves, 2023).

2022 EPAS and ADEI

The social work profession maintains a fundamental commitment to addressing oppression, racism, discrimination, and inequities while acknowledging personal privilege (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). This commitment is not peripheral to social work identity but central to its mission and ethical foundation. It necessitates comprehensive education about how racism and oppression shape human experiences across multiple practice levels,

“The shortest version is, if we don’t push back [against anti-DEI], we’re not social work. We will lose our identity ... If we do not hold the line, ... we will no longer exist. We will not be social workers.” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

including individual, family, group, organizational, and community interventions, as well as policy and research domains.

The 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards EPAS; CSWE, 2022 established anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) as a cornerstone of social work education, emphasizing the need to understand how diversity and intersectionality influence human experiences, identity development, equity, and inclusion. This framework recognizes intersectionality as encompassing multiple dimensions, including but not limited to age, caste, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, generational status, immigration status, legal status, marital status, nationality, political ideology, race, religion and spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status. This comprehensive approach reflects social work's understanding that oppression operates through interlocking systems that cannot be addressed in isolation.

“I’m opposed to using language that masks what we’re actually trying to teach. I’m opposed to cleaning our websites of particular language ... for us to acquiesce to that which goes against the principles of social work.” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

As CSWE strengthened ADEI requirements, a coordinated political backlash emerged. Anti-ADEI state legislation and executive orders have proliferated across the United States, targeting the very foundations of social work education. These legislative efforts seek to prohibit or severely restrict teaching about systemic racism, structural oppression, and inequality—topics that are inseparable from competent, ethical social work practice.

Social work programs in states that have enacted restrictions on DEI initiatives are navigating a complex accreditation compliance landscape. Despite attempts to ban ADEI content, at the time of writing state legislation allows ADEI content to be taught as a teaching exemption or an accreditation exemption. Nonetheless, many universities are enforcing censorship beyond what the law mandates. This can create tension between legal requirements and accreditation expectations that programs must carefully interpret and manage. Debates over DEI policies reflect broader disagreements about the role of anti-racism education, how to address structural inequality, and how institutions should respond to histories of discrimination.

Meetings with social work programs in states with restrictive legislation revealed the stark challenges programs face in implementing ADEI principles amid hostile legislative environments. Focus groups conducted with CSWE commission and council members further illuminated the crisis facing social work education. Programs reported self-censorship, fear of political retaliation, and profound uncertainty about how to prepare students for anti-oppressive practice when discussing the realities of oppression.

Other Legislative Threats to Social Work Education

Threats to Accreditation

The current political environment presents significant challenges for social work education, including growing scrutiny of accreditation processes. CSWE accreditation standards have long served as the profession's primary quality assurance mechanism, helping ensure that programs prepare graduates for ethical, competent practice. Proposals that weaken or bypass accreditation could introduce risks to program quality and create uncertainty about what constitutes adequate preparation for social work roles.

While these developments do not yet represent an immediate dismantling of accreditation, they underscore the need for vigilance and strategic engagement. If accreditation requirements become less consistent or less central to state licensure and employer expectations, it may become harder to maintain shared benchmarks for practitioner competence. In this context, it is essential to reaffirm that accreditation standards exist not as bureaucratic hurdles, but as core safeguards that support public protection, professional identity, and the integrity of social work education.

“It’s very stressful for programs like mine in a state where there’s very impactful legislation.” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Student Loan Policy Changes

Student loan policies present another formidable challenge. For some, social work may offer modest salary growth relative to the level of education and licensure required. Yet many students accumulate substantial debt to obtain the credentials necessary for practice. Changes to Pell Grants, direct federal loans, and student loan forgiveness programs, particularly for those serving in the public sector, create significant barriers to entering the profession. When student debt burdens become unsustainable relative to social work salaries, the profession risks losing talented individuals who might otherwise dedicate their careers to serving marginalized communities.

These implications extend beyond individual career choices. If only those with financial resources can afford social work education, the profession loses the diverse perspectives essential to culturally responsive practice. Social work has long valued practitioners who bring lived experience with the communities and challenges they address. Financial barriers that disproportionately affect candidates from working-class backgrounds, first-generation college students, and individuals from historically marginalized communities undermine the profession’s ability to reflect and effectively serve the populations most affected by social, economic, and health inequities.

Cuts to Research Funding

Research funding cuts compound these challenges, threatening the knowledge generation that advances practice and informs policy advocacy. Federal agencies, such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation, as well as specialized institutes studying social problems, have historically funded social work research. As these funding streams contract, researchers face intensified competition for limited resources, potentially steering inquiry toward topics more likely to attract funding rather than those most critical to vulnerable populations. The NIH (2025) announced that it would reduce the maximum indirect cost rate for university research grants from 50%–15%, a change explicitly recommended by Project 2025 and one that would significantly constrain the institutional capacity to support research infrastructure and compliance.

Private funding trends present their own complications. While philanthropic support for social work research can fill gaps left by reduced public funding, private funders often prioritize specific issues aligned with donor interests. This creates potential distortions in the knowledge base, with well-funded topics receiving disproportionate attention while equally important but less fashionable issues remain understudied. The shift toward private funding also raises questions about research independence and the influence of donor preferences on scholarly inquiry.

Within the Academy

Despite formidable obstacles, social work programs across the United States have shown remarkable adaptability in their efforts to align with the 2022 EPAS (CSWE, 2022) requirements while addressing complex institutional challenges and the changing political landscape. These responses reflect a concerted effort to maintain accreditation compliance while fostering meaningful change in educational practices.

Programs have developed innovative pedagogical methodologies that navigate the tension between maintaining educational rigor and operating within existing regulatory frameworks. This work extends beyond adding isolated ADEI content to syllabi and instead involves revisiting learning objectives, assessment strategies, and pedagogical approaches. Many programs now embed anti-oppressive frameworks across multiple courses and field learning, ensuring that students engage with these concepts in varied contexts and at multiple points in their education (Smith et al., 2025). This reflects a recognition that cultural humility and anti-racist practice competencies develop through sustained, iterative engagement rather than one-time exposure.

These approaches demonstrate the profession's commitment to educational excellence while acknowledging the constraints imposed by broader institutional and policy contexts. In states with anti-ADEI legislation, some programs have adopted creative strategies to continue teaching essential content through reframing, emphasizing case-based learning that illustrates systemic inequalities without explicitly naming prohibited concepts, or connecting content to professional ethics and competencies in ways that satisfy legal requirements while maintaining educational integrity.

Yet these institutional responses, however innovative, cannot obscure the fundamental challenges programs face. The need to navigate hostile political environments while maintaining accreditation standards creates enormous stress for administrators, faculty, and students. Resources devoted to strategic compliance represent resources unavailable for other educational priorities. The cognitive and emotional labor required to sustain anti-oppressive education amid political attacks exact a toll that accreditation standards cannot measure but that profoundly affects educational quality and community well-being.

Problematic Teaching Behaviors

Focus group findings revealed troubling patterns of discriminatory behavior within academic environments that contradict the profession's stated values and 2022 EPAS (CSWE, 2022) requirements. These findings suggest a significant disconnect between institutional policies and actual practice within social work education programs—a disconnect that could undermine the profession's credibility and educational mission.

Participants reported instances of faculty members engaging in discriminatory behaviors directed toward both students and colleagues from marginalized backgrounds. Such behaviors manifest in various forms, from subtle microaggressions to overt exclusionary practices that create hostile learning and working environments. Students described faculty who dismissed their perspectives and questioned their competence based on identity characteristics, or created classroom dynamics where certain voices were privileged while others were marginalized. Faculty reported similar experiences, with faculty of color, LGBTQ+ faculty, Jewish faculty, and faculty with disabilities encountering barriers to full participation in departmental governance and professional advancement.

Given the explicit commitment of social work education to social justice and anti-oppressive principles, these patterns are of particular concern. Instructors are responsible for teaching anti-oppressive practices in social work programs, and should model these behaviors for their students. Students quickly recognize the contradiction between espoused values and actual behaviors, becoming cynical about the profession's commitment to social justice and confused about what constitutes ethical practice.

When behaviors contradict social work values, powerful messages are conveyed about what professional practice entails versus what it claims to value. Students learn that anti-oppressive rhetoric may be required in classroom assignments but need not translate into actual behavior. They observe that challenging discrimination carries risks, that those with power can behave badly without meaningful consequences, and that institutional commitment to justice may be more performative than substantive (Kagotho et al., 2023; McClendon et al., 2021; Wahler & Badger, 2016).

These findings highlight the need for effective accountability mechanisms within social work education. Programs cannot rely solely on curriculum reform and policy statements while ignoring faculty, administration, or student behaviors that contradict anti-oppressive principles. Faculty governance structures, academic freedom protections, and the power dynamics inherent in academic hierarchies all complicate efforts to address problematic behaviors.

Accessibility Infrastructure

Institutions have made substantial investments in accessibility infrastructure, recognizing that inclusive education requires both philosophical commitment and tangible resources (Karagianni & Drigas, 2023). These investments range from assistive technologies (e.g., screen readers, captioning tools) and physical accommodations (e.g., accessible classrooms and practicum sites) to digital accessibility efforts that ensure that learning management systems, course materials, and assessment platforms meet recognized accessibility standards. In many cases, institutions are moving beyond individual accommodations and toward Universal Design for Learning approaches that proactively structure courses to be accessible to a wide range of learners from the outset, rather than retrofitting supports after barriers emerge.

Accessibility should extend beyond mobility and sensory disabilities to encompass chronic health conditions, neurodivergence, mental health disabilities, and the realities of students who balance disability, caregiving, and employment. As more courses adopt online and hybrid formats, accessibility considerations must include captioning and transcription, compatible document formats, flexible participation options, and clear communication

“We may teach anti-racism in the classroom, but then we go into faculty meetings, and we are clearly engaging in aggression or microaggressions across the spectrum.” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“I am an associate professor who is Jewish ... The past two years have been a nightmare ... and the ADEI is not representing Jewish faculty and Jewish students, and I really think that needs to be addressed.”

— FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“It’s a really dangerous time to be queer and trans ... If we can put something in the language specifically supporting our immigrant students, immigrant families ... [and] recognizing the most vulnerable groups.” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

of expectations and timelines. For social work education, this includes attention to the accessibility of field education, such as ensuring that practicum sites and supervision models are accessible and inclusive (Kiesel et al., 2018).

At the same time, gaps and inconsistencies remain. Students and faculty with disabilities may still experience difficulty navigating disability services processes, delays in receiving accommodations, or uneven faculty implementation of accessibility guidance (DeZelar et al., 2022). These challenges are often compounded for students and faculty from historically marginalized communities, who may face stigma, distrust of institutions, or additional barriers to documentation.

Field Education Implementation

The implementation of ADEI competencies within field education presents unique challenges that reflect broader structural inequalities within social work practice settings. Field education, often described as the signature pedagogy of social work, is where students integrate classroom learning with practice experience. Yet this critical component of social work education has become an example of how the profession’s commitment to equity confronts persistent structural barriers.

The rising costs of higher education and social work education at all levels are discussed further in another section of this document. The high cost of social work education plays out in the field because increasingly, students cannot participate in social work education without having paid work. The expectation that students can afford to work without pay for extended periods reflects class privilege that many students do not possess.

Student advocacy efforts have focused on securing paid placement opportunities, highlighting how traditional field education models may inadvertently perpetuate the very inequalities that the 2022 EPAS (CSWE, 2022) seeks to address. Unpaid internships disproportionately burden students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color. Many lack the financial resources to work full-time without compensation.

Students who must work paid employment alongside their field placements risk compromising both their educational experience and their well-being (Hodge et al., 2021). Some students accumulate additional debt to survive during their practicums, exacerbating the already concerning burden of educational loans. Others delay graduation, extending their time to degree completion and postponing entry into paid professional practice. Still others leave social work education entirely, unable to manage the financial strain that unpaid field placements impose.

These dynamics create a troubling selection effect: Social work may increasingly attract only those with sufficient financial resources to sustain themselves through unpaid internships, while excluding talented individuals whose economic circumstances make such arrangements untenable. This outcome contradicts social work’s commitment to workforce diversity and the principle that those with lived experience of marginalization bring invaluable perspectives to practice with marginalized communities.

Implementation of ADEI faces distinct obstacles in field education. Students placed in agencies with problematic racial climates must navigate hostile environments at the very

“The ability for students to utilize their job as their internship has been lifechanging for students and for field directors.”

— FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

moment they are forming their professional identities—a position that can reinforce rather than challenge oppressive norms. Field instructors who lack anti-oppressive supervision training are ill-equipped to develop students' ADEI competencies, and agency policies that conflict with the 2022 EPAS requirements create ethical dilemmas for students and faculty liaisons alike.

These challenges expose a deeper structural tension: Field placements are embedded within practice contexts that reflect the same systemic inequalities that the 2022 EPAS (CSWE, 2022) seeks to dismantle. Programs can overhaul curricula and revise policies, but students will still enter agencies shaped by the very forces those reforms aim to counter. Meaningful change requires sustained engagement with practice settings to cultivate anti-oppressive organizational cultures, not just internal academic reform.

Ultimately, social work education that cannot address racism, oppression, and inequality fails the populations the profession exists to serve. Clients experiencing homelessness, families in the child welfare system, individuals with mental health challenges in under-resourced communities, and immigrants facing discrimination all deserve practitioners equipped to understand and act on the structural forces shaping their lives. Legislative efforts to prohibit this education harm the profession and the people who need it most.

The Changing Role of Academic Leadership

The role of social work deans has evolved dramatically, reflecting broader transformations in higher education and the profession itself (Natland et al., 2025). This evolution carries profound implications for how schools navigate contemporary challenges and prepare future practitioners—particularly as deans find themselves on the front lines of defending ADEI principles against political attacks.

Traditionally, social work deans functioned primarily as internal academic administrators, focusing on curriculum oversight, faculty management, and student affairs. Their responsibilities centered on maintaining smooth operations within established frameworks and guiding faculty careers. Today's deans must be visionary leaders capable of articulating and implementing strategic plans that position their schools competitively in a complex educational landscape (Grajfoner et al., 2024). They face pressure to move schools forward while contributing to 21st century social work education that addresses contemporary challenges—from systemic racism and economic inequality to climate change and technological disruption.

Modern social work schools have developed sophisticated administrative hierarchies that reflect this complexity. Deans now work with councils, including vice deans, associate deans for academic affairs, graduate enrollment, student services, and specialized administrative staff (Grajfoner et al., 2024). This diversification of administrative structure presents both opportunities and challenges. While specialized roles allow focused attention on critical functions, they also create coordination demands and potential communication barriers that earlier, simpler structures did not face.

External engagement has become central to the dean's role in ways unimaginable in earlier decades. Today's social work deans must serve as active ambassadors, engaging alumni, donors, community partners, and professional organizations. Fundraising has evolved from occasional outreach to a critical, ongoing responsibility, driven by declining public funding for education and intensified competition for resources. Deans who once could focus primarily on academic matters now spend substantial time cultivating relationships and making financial cases for their programs.

This shift carries implications for leadership in social work education, including who becomes a dean and what constitutes success as a dean (Natland et al., 2025). The skills required for effective external engagement differ markedly from those central to academic leadership. A brilliant scholar and skilled curriculum developer may lack the temperament or interest for constant fundraising and public relations. This disconnect raises questions about how the profession identifies and develops academic leaders, and whether the demands of contemporary deanships align with social work's core values and mission.

The current political climate adds another layer of complexity. Deans in states with anti-DEI legislation must maintain the balance between upholding accreditation standards and complying with state law. They must protect faculty who teach about racism and oppression while managing institutional risk. They must communicate with legislators, boards of trustees, and university administrators who may not understand—or may actively oppose—social work's commitment to addressing systemic inequality. These responsibilities demand political acumen and moral courage that extend far beyond traditional academic administration.

The integration of technology and innovation represents another transformed domain. Contemporary deans must navigate digital transformation in education, incorporating online learning platforms, data analytics for student success, and technology-enhanced teaching methods. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these changes, forcing rapid adaptation that revealed both opportunities and limitations of digital education. Deans must now balance technology's potential with concerns about equity, access, and the irreplaceable value of in-person interaction, particularly for developing practical skills and establishing a professional identity.

Accountability and assessment pressures have intensified markedly. Modern deans operate under constant demands for measurable outcomes, demonstrating the value of their programs through national rankings, accreditation standards, and outcome metrics (Grajfoner et al., 2024). While accountability serves legitimate purposes, the emphasis on quantifiable measures can distort priorities, encouraging a focus on metrics that may not capture the most important dimensions of social work education. The challenge lies in maintaining meaningful accountability while resisting reductionist approaches that miss what matters most.

Interdisciplinary collaboration has expanded dramatically. Today's social work deans build bridges with other academic disciplines, healthcare systems, and community organizations in ways extending far beyond traditional academic partnerships. This reflects social work's expanding role in addressing complex societal challenges that resist disciplinary boundaries—from the opioid crisis and homelessness to climate adaptation and criminal justice reform. While interdisciplinary work enriches social work education and expands the profession's impact, it also demands new skills and raises questions about maintaining social work's distinctive perspective and identity.

Recent crises have revealed yet another dimension of contemporary academic leadership: crisis management and adaptability (Grajfoner et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic required deans to demonstrate crisis leadership skills, rapidly adapt programs, and support students and faculty through unprecedented challenges. These events exposed the inadequacy of traditional administrative approaches and underscored the need for leaders who can navigate uncertainty while upholding commitments to social work values.

Legal actions increasingly affect deans' work, from challenges to affirmative action and diversity initiatives to disputes over free speech and academic freedom. Deans must

understand the legal implications of institutional policies and practices while maintaining educational environments that prepare students for anti-oppressive practice. This legal landscape constrains options and creates risks that earlier generations of deans rarely faced.

Shared governance traditions face strain under these pressures. Historically, faculty exercised substantial influence over curriculum, hiring, and academic policy through democratic processes emphasizing collective decision-making. As administrative structures have grown more complex and external demands have become more urgent, some observers note an erosion of shared governance, with decisions increasingly concentrated in administrative hands. This shift raises fundamental questions about power, voice, and values in social work education (Call et al., 2013).

Faculty development and mentorship have become casualties of these changes. Junior faculty, particularly those from underrepresented groups, require substantial mentorship to navigate academic careers successfully. Deans and senior faculty face mounting pressures—increased teaching loads, service demands, and administrative responsibilities—that leave limited time for mentoring (Grajfoner et al., 2024). Mentorship needs have grown more complex. Early-career faculty must understand not only their disciplines and teaching but also grant writing, community-engaged research, online pedagogy, and, increasingly, how to navigate uncertainty (Call et al., 2013). The changing roles of deans, with their focus pulled outward toward fundraising and external relations, may reduce their availability for the kind of mentorship that once characterized academic leadership.

Toxic Environments and the Communication Crisis

Perhaps no challenge facing social work academia cuts deeper than the prevalence of toxic workplace environments and the breakdown of constructive communication. The irony is profound and painful: a profession dedicated to healthy relationships, conflict resolution, and creating supportive environments for vulnerable populations often struggles to maintain these qualities within its own institutions (McClendon et al., 2021).

Focus group discussions revealed that toxic academic environments manifest in various forms. Bullying by faculty or administrators, exclusionary practices that marginalize certain voices, excessive workloads that lead to burnout, and cultures that punish rather than support vulnerability and growth all appear with disturbing frequency. The focus group findings regarding discriminatory faculty behavior exemplify this crisis. When faculty engage in the very behaviors social work education seeks to eliminate—microaggressions, dismissiveness toward marginalized voices, resistance to addressing racism—they create toxic environments that damage individuals and undermine institutional missions. The gap between what is taught and what is modeled becomes a chasm that students must navigate, often at great personal cost.

The breakdown of communication skills compounds these problems. Social work education emphasizes communication competencies for practice with clients, yet these same skills often seem absent in internal faculty and administrative interactions. According to focus group participants, many difficult conversations are avoided rather than engaged in constructively. Conflicts escalate because parties lack skills—or the

“One of the biggest things we’re dealing with is the pushback on the white fragility ... Meetings [are] being pretty much taken over by faculty of color having to hold these emotionally charged meetings that we can’t get through.” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

willingness—to listen actively, validate different perspectives, and work toward mutually acceptable solutions.

Learning to communicate effectively in academic settings requires intentional effort and institutional support. Faculty and administrators need training in conflict resolution, difficult conversations, and trauma-informed communication. They need structures that facilitate honest dialogue about problems before they metastasize into crises. They need modeling from leadership that demonstrates how to disagree respectfully, apologize when wrong, and prioritize relationship maintenance alongside task completion.

Conclusion

Social work education stands at a crossroads. The challenges documented throughout this analysis—anti-DEI legislation, research funding cuts, student debt burdens, toxic academic environments, and the mounting pressures on academic leadership—are not isolated policy problems. They represent a coordinated set of forces that, taken together, threaten the intellectual, ethical, and demographic foundations of the profession.

Programs across the country have demonstrated genuine creativity and resolve in defending their educational missions. Faculty and administrators have found ways to teach what matters, often under difficult circumstances, because they understand what is at stake. The populations that social work exists to serve—those navigating poverty, discrimination, mental illness, housing instability, and structural exclusion—cannot wait for the political climate to improve. They need practitioners who are trained to see systems, not just symptoms.

Curriculum innovation matters, but it is insufficient if accreditation standards are undermined by state law. Advocacy matters, but it rings hollow if the internal culture of social work programs reproduces the very hierarchies and exclusions the profession publicly opposes. External political threats matter, but so do the quieter failures that focus group participants described—the microaggressions, the silenced voices, the junior faculty left without mentorship while deans are pulled toward fundraising and other administrative tasks.

What this moment demands is alignment among CSWE, program leadership, faculty, and students because the communities most harmed by the erosion of anti-oppressive education are the same communities social work has always claimed as its central concern.

The profession has weathered disruption before. It has adapted to shifting policy landscapes, survived funding contractions, and found ways to maintain its ethical commitments amid institutional constraints. That history offers cause for measured confidence, though not complacency. Responding to these challenges will require the full range of legal, pedagogical, political, and relational tools available to the profession. The path forward requires clarity about what cannot be compromised, honesty about where the profession falls short of its own ideals, and the sustained collective will to close that gap. That is, ultimately, what social work education has always asked of its graduates. Only through such alignment can social work education fulfill its essential role in preparing practitioners capable of addressing the profound challenges facing contemporary society. The mission remains unchanged: to prepare ethical, competent practitioners to serve vulnerable populations.

“EPAS has to not only look at the experiences of students, but look at the experiences ... of faculty as well, and the structures in place around who gets promoted, who’s represented, whose voices are heard.”

— FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Technology and Social Work

There is a critical need for social workers to develop technological competencies as digital platforms mediate human interactions and service delivery. Technology is fundamentally transforming social work through:

- telehealth platforms reshaping clinical practice
- mobile mental health apps creating new intervention possibilities
- social media changing how communities organize and communicate
- virtual reality offering innovative training apps
- artificial intelligence (AI) automating decision-making processes
- data analytics enhancing assessment and evaluation capabilities.

Technology's centrality in contemporary social work stems from our digitized environments. Social work practice now occurs in contexts where technology mediates daily interactions, access to resources, and delivery of essential services. This technological saturation requires practitioners to navigate digital platforms competently while anticipating and responding to both challenges and opportunities.

The proliferation of mental health and well-being apps presents opportunities and challenges demanding social work expertise. As these digital tools become prevalent, social workers occupy important advisory positions, evaluating apps and advising on appropriate use. This role requires assessing which apps might benefit specific clients, understanding optimal conditions for their use, and identifying potential risks. Social workers must develop sophisticated understanding of data privacy and confidentiality across various technology platforms to protect the confidentiality fundamental to our practice.

Social workers should be influencing national policy discussions regarding the impact of technology on individual and community well-being. Moreover, social workers must critically examine the unintended consequences of widespread technology adoption, including effects on marginalized communities and fundamental aspects of human identity and experience. This necessitates developing a professional identity that encompasses both traditional social work values and technological competence. This is a sociotechnical perspective, viewing society and technology as one coherent system. This approach recognizes that technology's real-world safety and performance are always a product of technical design and broader societal forces, including organizational bureaucracy, human labor, social conventions, and power dynamics. Social workers are ideally positioned to understand the social impacts of given technologies, including anticipating likely social outcomes from AI use while valuing human contribution and the use of AI in support of human decision-making.

Sources of Knowledge

This section reflects the work of the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Commission on Educational Policy (COEP) commissioners and members of the Task Force

on Technology and Social Work Education. COEP commissioners performed a desk study of publications relevant to technology and social work education. They also asked focus group participants about what kinds of technological skills they thought were needed.

In addition, COEP convened a task force in 2024–25 to examine technology’s impact on social work education and practice, with specific focus on developing recommendations for the 2029 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). The task force brought together leading social work researchers and educators with recognized expertise in diverse aspects of technology.

The task force organized into three work groups to examine (1) digital knowledge and skills that social workers need, (2) how technology changes social work’s methods of learning and practice, and (3) how technology, particularly artificial intelligence, affects social work goals. The task force published the “[CSWE Commission on Educational Policy Task Force on Technology and Social Work Education Report](#),” which highlights findings and recommendations (CSWE, 2025a).

Digital Knowledge and Skills Needed

Three interconnected areas of digital skill development were identified as necessary for contemporary practice: foundational digital skills, practice-integration competencies, and leadership in technology (CSWE, 2025a).

Foundational Digital Skills

In a digital world, social workers face the dual challenge of embracing technology while staying true to their professional values. Digital literacy has emerged as a crucial competency that enables social workers to effectively navigate and utilize various technological tools in their practice. This involves not only understanding basic technology concepts but also troubleshooting common technical issues and staying up-to-date with emerging technologies. It is this foundational literacy that allows for the seamless integration of technology into everyday professional tasks.

The importance of information literacy cannot be overstated. Social workers must equip themselves with the skills necessary to critically assess the vast amounts of information available online. In an era marked by misinformation and algorithmic bias, the ability to identify credible sources and help clients navigate complex digital landscapes is crucial. This expertise empowers social workers to not only make informed decisions but also guide service users through the challenges that arise from the overwhelming flow of information.

Moreover, establishing a technology-informed professional identity is essential. Social workers must intertwine their technological competence with their core professional values, ensuring that the use of technology enhances their practice rather than diminishes it. This requires a delicate balance as they navigate the ethical implications of technology in their work. By integrating these skills, social workers can adapt to the demands of the digital age while remaining steadfast in their commitment to human rights, social justice, and client advocacy. The integration of foundational digital skills—digital literacy, information literacy, and the development of a technology-informed professional identity—represents a pivotal shift in the field of social work. As social workers embrace these competencies, they enhance their ability to support clients in an increasingly complex and digital world.

Practice-Integration Competencies

In the evolving landscape of social work, the integration of technology plays a pivotal role in effecting meaningful social change and empowering clients. Social workers today are tasked with harnessing the power of digital tools to enhance their practice and advocacy. This involves not only using technology and social media strategically but also employing digital storytelling techniques that can give voice to the experiences and struggles of service users. By leveraging online organizing tools, social workers can effectively mobilize communities and drive social justice initiatives within both virtual and in-person environments.

The need for digital service coordination has become important. Practitioners must be proficient in utilizing technologies that allow for seamless collaboration among multiple service providers and systems. This includes mastery of case management software, referral systems, and digital communication platforms, which work together to ensure that service users receive comprehensive, cohesive, and efficient care. Moreover, the competency to deliver services via technology is critical.

To do this, social workers must navigate the complexities of virtual engagement, conduct online assessments, and manage therapeutic relationships, all while maintaining professional boundaries. Service users should have equitable access to these digital services, and barriers that may hinder their ability to receive support should be reduced.

Finally, proficiency in digital documentation is vital for effective practice. Social workers must be skilled in using electronic systems to document case notes and analyze data to identify meaningful patterns and trends. This capacity to maintain secure, detailed records while utilizing data analytics not only improves individual service delivery but also enhances organizational effectiveness, ultimately leading to better outcomes for clients. Through these efforts, social workers can embrace technology as a powerful ally in their pursuit of human rights and social justice.

Technology Leadership Considerations

Social workers should be able to evaluate, recommend, and support the adoption of new technological systems within organizations. This involves understanding both technical requirements and organizational change management principles, thus serving as a bridge between the technical and practical domains.

Social workers need to possess the skills to anticipate emerging technologies and their implications for social work practice, as these are increasingly important. This includes staying informed about technological trends and their potential impact on client populations and service delivery models, and enabling proactive rather than reactive responses to technological change. Social workers must actively participate in the adoption of technology, rather than remain passive recipients of it. They should help shape how digital tools are developed, implemented, and utilized, including how the tools might affect privacy, accessibility, and equity.

AI and Social Work

AI is a disruptive innovation affecting social work educational policy and practice. As a human-rights-based profession globally recognized for commitment to enhancing human well-being—particularly for marginalized, vulnerable, or oppressed populations—social work intersects with AI in complex ways. The potential intersection of these disciplines is not yet well understood and has considerable unrealized potential (CSWE, 2025a).

In recent years, AI has rapidly and significantly transformed various sectors, leading to enhanced efficiencies and innovative solutions. However, this rapid advancement has its challenges, particularly concerning the biases present in the algorithms that power AI systems. AI is infused across most arenas of public and private life, with particular consequences for populations often served by social workers. However, recent polling revealed that 72% of social work professionals rated their knowledge of AI as “low”; only 1% rated it “high” (CSWE, 2025a). This digital divide has significant implications for vulnerable communities facing structural inequities.

Social workers must become competent in AI and technology, or social work will lose its voice in decisions that directly harm the communities it serves.

AI Biases

AI bias, often referred to as “machine-learning bias” or “algorithmic bias,” can be defined as the tendency of AI-generated outputs to reflect existing human biases. This issue arises when the algorithms yield biased results due to flawed assumptions made during the machine-learning process. It is essential to understand that these biased results do not solely arise from biased programming or incomplete datasets. Many are a reflection of the human and systemic biases that are embedded within the data and processes used to train these AI systems.

Systemic bias originates from institutional practices that disadvantage specific social groups, while human bias relates to how individuals interpret data to address gaps in information. When human, systemic, and computational biases converge, they create a complex mix that can lead to serious ethical dilemmas. This issue is particularly evident in situations where there is insufficient guidance on mitigating the risks associated with deploying AI.

Compounding this issue is the phenomenon known as “automation bias,” which is the tendency of individuals to assume that computers are objective, authoritative, and fair. In practice, this bias may lead individuals to accept machine outputs, even when those outputs contradict their own professional judgment. To navigate the challenges posed by automation bias, it is crucial to cultivate an awareness of this tendency and to develop strategies for mitigating its effects in professional contexts.

The black box problem presents yet another layer of complexity. In their pursuit of optimization and efficiency, many machine-learning and decision-making processes lack adequate transparency, making it difficult to assess potential ethical implications. This opacity can hinder critical assessments necessary to effectively challenge problematic outcomes.

As of 2024, robust and standardized evaluations of AI systems are seriously lacking, creating significant barriers regarding accountability and harm mitigation. AI tools risk

overrepresentation of hegemonic views, perpetuating ableism, transphobia, racism, Islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination at scale. Furthermore, AI uses in treatment tools, mobile apps, chatbots, and documentation raise critical questions around the tension between practice efficiency (framed in terms of cost, scalability, and optimization) and ethical practices (attuned to trust building, accessibility, equity, and transparency).

As artificial intelligence continues to evolve, it is imperative to address the various forms of bias that can influence its output. By fostering an understanding of these biases and implementing effective mitigation strategies, organizations can harness the full potential of AI while minimizing its risks.

AI and Social Work Education

The potential for AI to de-skill social work is a significant concern. De-skilling occurs when humans lose the ability to complete tasks delegated to AI, resulting in professions that are effectively de-skilled. This extends to biasing human decision-making and bypassing human-to-human processes in favor of automated or partially automated decision-making and intervention.

The main areas where AI is influencing teaching and practice include online/distance learning, practicum experiences, learning through virtual simulations, and lifelong learning experiences. Having already been transformed by earlier technological disruptions, online learning is now integrating AI. However, to navigate this integration effectively, there is a pressing need for well-defined policies and standards. These guidelines should outline the parameters for using AI in online and distance education, thereby ensuring that the implementation of these technologies is both of high quality and ethically sound.

Initially driven by online programs and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, CSWE educational standards have evolved to include practice with individuals and systems via technology. However, concerns exist that online therapy and teletherapy could devolve into non-values-based iterations of AI without appropriate safeguards.

“Social work, of all professions who have a seat at the AI table, we are the profession that understands the human condition and how detrimental AI can be ... Can you imagine how many more out-of-home placements and horrific outcomes are going to happen from using AI to generate case records, and how much more embedded systemic racism that will be in the use of AI?” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Simulated learning environments can enhance, but should not supplant, engagement with human clients and systems. The balance between technological innovation and human interaction remains critical to social work education.

The rapid pace of technological advancement necessitates that CSWE support educators through ongoing learning opportunities and evolving educational policy and accreditation standards. Professional development focused on technology should be continuous rather than episodic.

Social workers have a professional responsibility to engage in discussions about AI as it becomes incorporated into society. It is essential that the profession understands the opportunities posed by AI, along with its limitations, while retaining a focus on human relationships. While machine learning shows great potential, social data are inherently uncertain, making it challenging to apply AI principles without a deep understanding of the technology's limitations. The human-computer-interaction field represents an important area for social work exploration and contribution. Educators must prepare students to interface with AI in meaningful ways that advance practice while maintaining professional values.

Unlike previous technological innovations, opting out of AI engagement is not a viable option. AI deployment is so ubiquitous that attempt to opt out—particularly in educational contexts—will produce social work practitioners incapable of understanding and engaging in practice within emerging technical environments.

Resistance to Technology Within Social Work

The integration of digital technologies into social work practice encounters challenges at individual, organizational, and professional levels, which can impede their effective adoption and utilization (CSWE, 2025a).

Social work perspectives remain inadequately represented in technology development processes and policy discussions, resulting in systems and applications that may not align with professional values or the realities of practice. Significant ethical questions have emerged regarding AI-driven discrimination, digital exclusion, algorithmic bias, and the appropriate role of professional expertise in technology design and implementation. Many current professional preparation programs fail to provide sufficient training in digital competencies, leaving practitioners inadequately equipped for technology-enabled practice environments. The proliferation of digital mental health apps has created novel professional responsibilities for assessment and recommendation that many practitioners feel unprepared to fulfill.

Practitioners consistently report that they lack sufficient time to acquire proficiency with new systems while maintaining their existing caseload responsibilities (Dollinger, 2026). This time constraint is compounded by legitimate privacy concerns and generalized anxiety regarding technology adoption.

Social workers often resist technology due to concerns about algorithmic bias, the potential for depersonalized practice, and threats to client dignity. While these concerns merit serious consideration, they may also function as defensive rationales that inhibit meaningful engagement with potentially beneficial tools.

Social service organizations encounter substantial obstacles to effective technology integration. Resource constraints limit the capacity of organizations for long-term strategic planning and systematic implementation of new platforms. For students, the shortage of field placement sites offering substantive opportunities for hands-on technology skill development creates a critical gap between educational objectives

“We’re dealing with colleagues who are completely anti-AI, and others that are fully embracing it ... If we are not supporting our students, they’re going to graduate at a disadvantage.” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“AI has been shown to be racist ... because it’s going off historically racist data.”

— FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

and practical competency acquisition. This infrastructure deficit prevents both current practitioners and students from gaining the applied experience necessary for confident, effective technology utilization.

Perhaps most significant, technology adoption encounters resistance rooted in professional identity and values. Many practitioners maintain skeptical attitudes toward technology, perceiving it as potentially threatening to core professional principles rather than as a complementary tool for practice enhancement. This perspective sometimes produces categorical rejection of technological solutions rather than critical, nuanced evaluation of specific applications. The reluctance to conceptualize technology proficiency as an essential component of contemporary professional identity creates substantive barriers to developing the sophisticated, values-informed engagement that effective practice requires.

These multilevel barriers suggest that successful technology integration will require coordinated interventions addressing individual skill development, organizational capacity building, and fundamental reconceptualization of professional identity and values in relation to technological innovation. Without comprehensive initiatives, the field of social work may struggle to maintain its influence over the technologies that are shaping professional practice. This potential decline in influence could compromise the profession's ability to effectively serve clients within the evolving landscape of service delivery.

Implementation Challenges

In the realm of social work education, disparities in resources can significantly affect student outcomes and overall program effectiveness. Considerable differences in personnel and technological capabilities exist among various social work programs. This inequity can result in a diverse range of learning experiences for students (CSWE, 2025a). Those who receive training in the effective use of AI as an educational tool will undoubtedly have a competitive advantage over their peers who do not develop this skill. As the profession evolves, ensuring equitable access to these resources becomes paramount for fostering a competent workforce.

The social work profession has historically lagged in the adoption of new technologies, particularly AI. Social work's historic disconnection from the design and development of new digital technologies challenges the profession's ability to engage in redirecting the deployment of new digital tools. The "algorithmic turn"—the profusion of algorithmic decision-making in daily life, absent established regulatory or ethical frameworks—creates ethical and sociological challenges.

Social workers' slow embrace of innovation limits practitioners' ability to fully leverage advancements that could enhance their practice. To remain relevant and effective, it is crucial for social work educators and professionals to catch up with the technological advancements seen in other fields. By proactively embracing these innovations, social work can transition from a reactive position to one that leads and shapes future developments in the discipline. This shift is vital for improving service delivery and addressing the complex needs of clients in a digital world.

Understanding and utilizing technology, and particularly AI, in social work practice requires advanced knowledge of concepts such as probability and causal inference. Unfortunately, these critical topics are often not included in the curricula of undergraduate

and master's programs in social work. Educational institutions should teach the necessary skills to comprehend and apply these concepts effectively. Preparing future social workers to navigate this evolving landscape will not only enhance their professional capabilities but also improve outcomes for the communities they serve.

Unregulated digital tools can reproduce problematic social relations, stigmatization, and isolation by absorbing current social prejudices and displacing human judgment and agency. However, AI applications also have the potential to enhance well-being through advances in social welfare, human services, healthcare, assistive technologies, and education—when properly scoped and purposefully designed for inclusiveness, accountability, and transparency.

The ethical challenge of AI use centers on the necessity of addressing and alleviating detrimental social, economic, and political disparities, as well as human biases and power imbalances that unregulated artificial intelligence can exacerbate. In the context of social work, this necessitates the collaborative development of policies, knowledge, resources, and inclusive practices that effectively bridge these divides and enhance professional practice.

Conclusion

Telehealth platforms, AI-driven decision-making tools, algorithmic case management systems, and digital mental health apps are already shaping the conditions under which social workers practice and the experiences of the clients they serve. The question before the profession is no longer whether to engage with these realities, but how to engage with them in ways that are consistent with social work's core values and responsibilities.

The analysis presented in this section makes clear that the stakes of that engagement are high. When social workers lack foundational digital literacy, they are poorly positioned to advocate for clients navigating algorithmically mediated systems. When the profession remains absent from technology design and policy discussions, tools get built without input from those who understand the human consequences of their deployment. When AI systems trained on historically biased data are used to make decisions about child welfare, housing, and mental health treatment, the populations most harmed are precisely those that social work exists to serve.

The concerns practitioners raise about algorithmic bias, depersonalized practice, and the erosion of human judgment reflect genuine ethical tensions in the profession. Social work's grounding in human rights, structural analysis, and attention to power makes it an essential voice in conversations about how AI should and should not be used—but only if practitioners develop the knowledge base to participate meaningfully in those conversations.

This requires a transformation in how social work education approaches technology. Foundational digital skills, practice-integration competencies, and technology leadership cannot remain elective or supplementary concerns. They must be woven throughout curricula, field education, and faculty development in ways that treat technological competence as integral to professional identity rather than incidental to it. Programs must also grapple honestly with the resource disparities that create uneven preparation across institutions, recognizing that inequitable access to technology education reproduces the same structural inequalities that social work seeks to dismantle.

The finding that nearly three-quarters of social work professionals rate their AI knowledge as low is not simply a workforce development problem—it is a signal that the

profession risks becoming a passive recipient of decisions made by others about tools that profoundly affect vulnerable communities. Closing that gap will require investment, institutional commitment, and a willingness to treat AI literacy as a nonnegotiable component of contemporary professional preparation.

Social work education should provide the knowledge and skills to evaluate specific tools critically, to advocate for transparency and accountability in algorithmic systems, and to insist that technology serve human dignity rather than undermine it. CSWE should take the lead in defining digital competencies for the profession, recognizing that the decisions made now will shape social work practice for decades to come.

To successfully integrate technology into social work education and practice, we should:

- Move from viewing technology as threatening to seeing technological competence as integral to social work values and ethics.
- Address disparities in access to technology education and resources across programs.
- Recognize that rapid technological change requires ongoing professional development.
- Maintain focus on social work's core commitment to social justice, human dignity, and the importance of relationships.
- Engage in proactive participation in technology policy discussions and development rather than remain passive recipients.

As technology continues to evolve rapidly, the profession must remain agile, informed, and committed to ensuring that technological advances serve the social good and the populations that social workers are dedicated to serving.

Ways of Learning and Knowing: Pedagogical and Andragogical Innovation

This section examines important developments in social work education related to teaching, learning, and the assessment of professional readiness. It considers how social work education is adapting to evolving practice preparation expectations, including considerations from time-based toward competency-based approaches, innovations in field education, and the use of newer assessment methods and inclusive teaching frameworks. It also explores ongoing questions about how the profession supports competence across the educational continuum.

These developments are not only about curriculum content, but also about how students learn, how educators teach, and how programs determine whether graduates are prepared for practice. As social work education responds to changing student populations, practice environments, and professional expectations, greater attention is given to the relationship among instructional design, adult learning, and competency development.

Pedagogy and andragogy represent two foundational approaches to teaching and learning. Pedagogy, traditionally associated with children and younger learners, places the instructor in a more directive role, determining what is taught, when, and how, with learners often motivated by external expectations, such as grades. Andragogy, by contrast, is grounded in the characteristics of adult learners, who are more likely to be self-directed, bring prior experience to the learning process, and be motivated by the immediate relevance of what they are learning. In practice, effective social work education often draws on both approaches. For example, an instructor may begin by providing a structured explanation of a new concept and then shift to case-based or problem-centered learning that invites students to apply the material to prior experience and emerging practice judgment.

This emphasis on how students learn is especially important in social work education, where professional preparation depends not only on acquiring knowledge, but also on integrating values, judgment, and skills across classroom and practice settings. These considerations help frame the growing interest in competency-based education, which shifts the focus from time spent on educational experiences to the demonstration of practice competence.

The Evolution Toward Competency-Based Education

Social work education, like many other professions, evolved from the Carnegie Unit model. The Carnegie Unit was established in 1906 (Carnegie Foundation, n.d.) as the standard for measuring educational delivery, and now faces increasing scrutiny across disciplines and educational levels (McMillan & Barber, 2020). This time-based framework, which requires specified instructional hours and outside study time, does not guarantee equivalent competency development across all students. Competency-based education (CBE) is a departure from the traditional model of education, focusing on objectives,

“Field education is the biggest roller coaster ride you could be on.” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

content areas, and teaching and learning processes. CBE advocates for systems that prioritize demonstrated mastery of measurable skills and accomplished milestones over seat time.

The transition to competency-based education necessitates several foundational elements: development of robust evaluative tools, comprehensive professional development for educators, institutional commitment to pedagogical transformation, and flexibility in admissions and credit structures (Echols et al., 2018; Erbes et al., 2021). These requirements represent substantial systemic changes that extend beyond individual programs to affect entire educational ecosystems.

Social work education in the United States underwent a significant change in 2008, when the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) adopted a competency-based model (McGuire & Lay, 2020). This shift from traditional content-based approaches sparked considerable debate within the profession (Bogo, 2010; Drisko, 2014). The 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) emphasized the performance of learners and what they have mastered—not just in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, but also in the application of their learning to real-world problem-solving across various systems, including individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. While practitioners acknowledged the importance of demonstrable competencies, there were concerns that this focus might lead to a loss of the holistic practice perspectives that are essential for effective social work.

In response to these concerns, the 2015 EPAS (CSWE, 2015) introduced the concept of “holistic competence” and multidimensional assessment frameworks (Drisko, 2014; Poulin & Matis, 2015). This evolution challenged educational programs to rethink how they develop and evaluate student competency across interconnected domains: knowledge, values, skills, and both cognitive and affective processes. The current 2022 EPAS (CSWE, 2022) reflects this integrated approach to professional preparation, emphasizing the professional commitment to social justice and human rights principles.

While social work education has laid the groundwork for moving toward CBE, we have not yet fully achieved this goal. The 2022 EPAS (CSWE, 2022) requires programs to assess student competencies in nine areas. However, standards do not acknowledge life and professional experiences in human services, which means that students cannot receive credit for the knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes they have developed prior to program matriculation.

As noted above, increasingly students enrolling in higher education are generally older and bring a wealth of life experiences. Many of them balance work, family, and education. They seek programs that offer flexibility to accommodate their lifestyles, are affordable, and can be completed in a shorter time frame. The rising cost of social work education, combined with diminishing loan opportunities, has reduced the number of students who can afford social work degrees, particularly those from households with limited incomes. Additionally, as individuals are more likely to change careers over their lifetimes, there are more potential social work students with prior knowledge and experience. Technology is also transforming how students learn.

Competencies are related to the older framework of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Parson et al., 2018). Although our current curricula address the competencies required for graduation, they fail to assess where students stand when they begin their studies.

As our world of professional practice becomes more dynamic and complex, we must be adept and proactive in understanding and responding to the needs, crises and socioeconomic and environmental changes that affect various systems. This requires ongoing interactions and exchanges between social work programs and their tasks and external environment to assess the skills and expectations of stakeholders, thereby identifying meaningful and representative skill sets as competencies. CBE increases the responsibility for educators and policymakers to devise robust and contextualized systems to assess and monitor learning outcomes, i.e. competencies (Gruppen et al., 2012).

Field Practicum Education: From Practice Requirement to Signature Pedagogy

Field education has long served as a cornerstone of social work professional preparation, evolving from brief training courses to comprehensive supervised practice experiences (Frumkin & Lloyd, 1995; Leighninger, 2000). Early field education followed an apprenticeship model, with students learning directly from experienced practitioners (Shaffer, 2008). As the profession matured, programs emphasized theoretical foundations and ethical frameworks alongside practical application.

The designation of field education as social work's signature pedagogy marks a significant conceptual advancement. Shulman's (2005) framework defines *signature pedagogy* as the distinctive approach through which a profession teaches novices to think critically, perform essential skills, and act with professional integrity. This conceptualization encourages intentional, theory-informed approaches to field education that emphasize not merely what students do, but how they learn from practical experiences.

Despite this elevated status, the actual pedagogy of field education remains understudied. While considerable attention has focused on structuring and assessing placements, scholarly work addressing the learning processes that occur within field settings is relatively scarce (Wayne et al., 2006). This gap represents an ongoing challenge for social work education, as our understanding of how different types of field experience reinforce classroom education and competency development is inadequate.

Simulation-Based Learning in Health Social Work

Simulation-based learning (SBL) has emerged as a valuable pedagogical tool, particularly for health social work students developing clinical competencies required in integrated healthcare settings. SBL provides safe, controlled environments where students can practice complex skills before encountering them with actual clients.

Research on technology-enhanced SBL implementation further demonstrates its effectiveness in social work education. A study using computerized clinical training simulations with virtual clients abusing alcohol, implemented within an interpersonal practice course in a CSWE-accredited MSW program, assessed students' development across clinical practice skills, including cognitive behavioral therapy, motivational interviewing, exploration, insight, and action skills (Smith et al., 2020). Findings showed improved performance scores, increased self-efficacy, and reported transfer of skills to field placement interactions, supporting the use of virtual simulation methods as a scalable supplement to traditional role-play and field-based learning in social work curricula.

SBL is increasingly used in social work and health profession education to strengthen readiness for practice and reduce training risk. The method raises questions about how it should be used in the classroom, whether it can count toward required field hours, and how much it should be part of social work education (Keeney et al., 2022).

The Vignette-Based Skills Assessment

The Vignette-Based Skills Assessment (VBSA) represents an innovative approach to evaluating student competency through case-based written assessments. Developed to measure competency progression during the foundation year of master of social work (MSW) programs, the VBSA employs standardized scenarios to evaluate knowledge and skills across multiple competency domains.

Research involving 58 MSW students demonstrated significant improvement in VBSA scores following completion of foundation-year field placements, suggesting that the tool effectively captures competency development. The VBSA offers potential advantages over traditional field instructor assessments by providing more objective, standardized evaluation methods that integrate theoretical knowledge with practical application (Fisher & Setterlund, 2018).

However, implementation challenges exist. The VBSA requires substantial time for scoring, and additional research is needed to establish comprehensive validity and reliability. Furthermore, the lack of correlation between VBSA scores and field instructor ratings suggests that relying on any single assessment method provides an incomplete picture of student competency. These findings underscore the necessity of multimethod assessment approaches (Fisher & Setterlund, 2018).

Reimagining Grading and Assessment Practices

For social work to fully realize its identity as a competency-based profession, grading practices require fundamental reconsideration. Social work’s commitment to strengths-based practice suggests that assessment approaches should model these same values (Gibbons & Gray, 2002; Kealey, 2010; Krutkowski, 2017; White & Waters, 2015). Training faculty and field supervisors in competency-based grading represents an important step toward consistency between professional values and educational practices, particularly in online learning environments where modeling opportunities may be limited.

Competency-based grading focuses on students achieving mastery of specific skills, concepts, and values rather than earning points for completed assignments (Townsend & Schmid, 2020). This approach aligns well with “ungrading” pedagogies, in which students receive detailed feedback and continue refining their work until achieving specified proficiency levels (Erbes et al., 2021; Gorichanaz, 2024; Koehler & Meech, 2022). Success becomes defined by skill acquisition and milestone attainment rather than point accumulation or comparative ranking.

Implementing competency-based grading requires substantial preparation. Faculty need comprehensive support as they learn new approaches to facilitating and evaluating student learning (Ashby et al., 2018; Hagen & Addison, 2019; Newbold et al., 2017). Students require

“If we are a competency-based education program, which we are, we do have students who come in who are competent in a lot of these areas. Is there a way to assess for that?” — FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

clear information about process and expectations to navigate systems that may differ substantially from their previous educational experiences (Bliven & Jungbauer, 2021). Whether CSWE should formally advocate for or provide guidance on competency-based grading represents an important question for the profession to address.

Competency and Licensure

The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB, 2022) identified significant disparities in licensure examination performance among social work examinees from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups. This prompted a debate over whether graduation from CSWE-accredited programs should be recognized as sufficient demonstration of social work competence, no longer requiring ASWB examinations for licensure. The rationale emphasized that accredited programs are specifically designed to develop and graduate competent practitioners, raising questions about the necessity of additional examination requirements at bachelor's and master's levels.

State responses varied considerably. Some jurisdictions instituted temporary moratoriums on examination requirements, while others maintained existing policies. This divergent response highlights ongoing tensions regarding competency verification approaches.

Research conducted by the American Foundation for Research and Consumer Education in Social Work Regulation (ASWB, 2024) offers insight into the views of practicing social workers on licensure examinations. A survey of 510 social work professionals yielded notable findings:

- 76% consider the licensing examination crucial for maintaining professional standards.
- 67% agree that the examination provides a vital measure of competence.
- 78% advocate for examination requirements for new professionals.
- 73% consider removing the examination requirement a mistake.
- 82% reject granting licenses based solely on educational credentials.
- 75% of social workers identifying as people of color support examination requirements.
- 96% favor proposed multistate compacts enabling licensed practitioners to practice across participating states.

These findings reveal substantial professional support for examination-based licensure, including among populations disproportionately affected by examination disparities. This creates a complex challenge for the profession: addressing legitimate concerns about examination equity while respecting the expressed preferences of current practitioners, including those from diverse backgrounds.

The tension between educational attainment and examination-based competency verification represents a significant policy question for social work education and regulation. Resolution requires balancing multiple considerations: ensuring competent, qualified practitioners; addressing demonstrated disparities in examination outcomes; respecting professional consensus; and maintaining public confidence in social work credentials. As this debate continues, social work education must remain committed to preparing graduates for competent, ethical practice regardless of the credentialing mechanisms ultimately employed.

Conclusion

Recent developments in pedagogy and andragogy make clear that the *how* of social work education matters as much as the *what*. Competency-based frameworks, the recognition of field education as signature pedagogy, and emerging tools such as SBL and the VBSA all reflect a broader push toward more intentional, evidence-informed teaching. Yet gaps remain. A lot of prior learning goes unrecognized, practicum supervision varies widely in its attention to learning processes, and assessment practices still tend to reward academic performance over demonstrable practice skill. These patterns point to areas where competency-based thinking has more work to do. Alongside this, growing commitments to anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion; Universal Design for Learning;; and transformative pedagogy call for something deeper than adding equity-focused content to existing curricula—they invite a structural rethinking of how learning environments are designed and for whom.

The profession's debates over licensure examinations capture just how contested the question of competence remains. Documented disparities in exam outcomes and concerns about structural bias exist in real tension with widespread practitioner support for maintaining exam requirements—and neither side of that tension can be dismissed. What emerges from this dynamic is a challenge that exceeds any single tool or policy fix. What social work education needs is a coherent ecosystem: one in which competencies, field learning, assessment, grading, and licensure are aligned with one another, the profession's core values, and the actual circumstances of today's learners. Building that ecosystem will take sustained good-faith collaboration among educators, regulators, students, and the communities that social workers serve—so that innovation in how people learn translates into genuinely stronger preparation for ethical, effective practice.

Implications and Recommendations for the 2029 EPAS

Social work education stands at a critical juncture, balancing tradition with innovation, standardization with flexibility, and equity with rigor. The shift toward competency-based frameworks, innovations in field education pedagogy, advances in assessment methodology, and commitments to inclusive teaching practices collectively represent substantial progress in professional preparation. However, significant work remains to fully realize these advancements and address ongoing challenges, particularly in competency verification and ensuring equitable outcomes for all students.

The profession's ability to thoughtfully navigate these complex issues while maintaining its core values will determine how effectively social work education prepares future practitioners to address complex social challenges. Continued scholarly attention, professional dialogue, and institutional commitment are essential to advancing social work education in ways that honor the profession's mission and serve the communities that social workers are called to support.

The recommendations in this section are linked to the five key thematic areas that emerged from the environmental scan. In addition, several recommendations apply more broadly to social work education and therefore extend across thematic categories. Collectively, these recommendations are grounded in the findings of the environmental scan, which drew on a literature review, focus group interviews, workforce data, and related sources to provide a holistic assessment of the current landscape and future direction of social work education.

Although many of the implications and recommendations in this report are written in relation to baccalaureate and master's social work education, many are also relevant to practice doctoral education. As part of the 2029 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) writing process, these areas will be assessed across the educational continuum for fit and feasibility, with some educational policies overlapping across degree levels and others developed specifically for practice doctorate programs.

A comprehensive takeaway from this review is that social work curricula must remain nimble, responsive, and forward-looking, so that programs are prepared to address emerging changes over the next decade, much as social work education seeks to prepare practitioners who can adapt to evolving practice contexts.

THEME 1: Importance of Social Work Identity and Values

Social work operates in an increasingly competitive landscape, with multiple helping professions and technology overlapping in scope, workforce, and public recognition. This competitive environment—combined with external political and legislative pressures that challenge the profession’s core values—creates an urgent need for social work to clearly and confidently reaffirm what makes it distinct. The profession’s identity is grounded in a unique integration of person-in-environment perspective, commitment to social justice, and direct engagement with society’s most vulnerable populations. That identity must not be diluted or redefined by external forces.

Social work’s professional values—service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, competence, human rights, and scientific inquiry—have guided the profession for more than a century. These values may be described differently across time, institutions, or political contexts, but their substance is nonnegotiable. Regardless of the labels applied, social work education must remain anchored to these values and prepare graduates who embody and practice them.

THEME 1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2029 EPAS

- Social work education must **remain anchored to these enduring values**, preparing graduates who fully embody and practice them, regardless of the specific terminology used to describe them.
- The 2029 EPAS should **incorporate preparation for the ethical and effective use of technology**. This policy must acknowledge that contemporary social work practice demands facility with technology—including digital tools, data systems, and artificial intelligence—while ensuring that this facility remains firmly grounded in ethical principles and human relationships.
- **Elevate interprofessional preparation**. Educational policy should encourage partnerships across disciplines and sectors to prepare students for practice in complex settings shaped by collaboration, innovation, and rapidly changing social conditions.
- Educational policy and accreditation standards should **encourage academic environments in which civility, respect, and meaningful engagement** are reflected in the culture of the program and the student learning experience.
- **Strengthen attention to professional identity formation** in social work education, including clearer articulation of what distinguishes social work as a profession and how students are introduced to its values, roles, and contributions to practice.

THEME 1 KEY CURRICULAR AREAS

- Connect the individual to their environment, including family, community, policy, systems, and global context.
 - Relate policy analysis, formulation, and advocacy to human well-being.
 - Incorporate content on the history, mission, and evolving role of the social work profession to reinforce professional identity formation throughout the curriculum.
 - Include explicit expectations in field education standards around professional identity development, including students’ ability to articulate social work’s distinct value base and role within the broader landscape of helping professions.
 - Identify social work’s contributions in interprofessional collaborations and reinforce this in practicum experiences.
 - Affirm social work’s unique identity as a helping profession, distinguishing it from adjacent fields through its dual focus on individual well-being and structural change.
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THEME 2: Person-in-Environment Practice

The ecological perspective posits that human development and behavior are shaped by reciprocal, ongoing interactions between individuals and the multiple, nested environmental systems surrounding them. A person should be understood in their context—from the immediacy of family and community to the broader reach of economic conditions and societal structures. This is the foundation of person-in-environment (PIE) practice, which recognizes that human behavior, health, and well-being emerge from a constantly shifting interplay of biological, psychological, social, economic, and environmental factors.

The 2029 EPAS should build on this foundation, expanding the PIE framework to meet the realities of a changing world. Digital environments, geographical contexts, the environmental footprint of digital infrastructure, and global systemic forces are now recognized as powerful shapers of human experience and therefore of social work practice itself.

Social workers must be prepared to help individuals, groups, and communities understand the world around them and how societal conditions shape their available options, what policies exist to support them, and the decisions that drive our society. This perspective reflects social work's identity and distinguishes it from other helping professions.

THEME 2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2029 EPAS

- **Maintain the person-in-environment perspective as the central organizing framework for social work education.** Educational policy should continue to emphasize preparing students to understand individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities within various institutional, environmental, economic, and historical contexts. Effective practice relies on understanding the full range of forces that shape human behavior and well-being.
- **Preserve the integrative connection between micro, mezzo, and macro across social work practice methods.** Curricula should continue to support students in understanding the reciprocal relationship between individuals and the broader systems in which they live and function. Educational policy should continue to reflect the profession's distinctive role in addressing individual needs and the institutional and policy contexts that shape them.
- **Strengthen EPAS language to reflect biopsychosocial and human sexual development across the lifespan in order to support comprehensive assessment, intervention, and person-in-environment practice.**
- **Preserve field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education.** Field education should remain central to social work preparation as the primary context in which students develop applied practice judgment, connect theory to human experience, and build the skills necessary for effective, real-world practice.
- **Maintain a focus on preparation for practice across degree levels.** Social work education should continue to prepare students for generalist, specialized, and doctoral practice, with clear attention to how each degree level contributes to professional formation, competency development, and readiness for practice.

THEME 2 KEY CURRICULAR AREAS

- Ecological systems theory and its contemporary applications
 - Biopsychosocial-spiritual-religious-sexual assessment frameworks
 - Social determinants of health across the lifespan
 - Digital environments: online communities, virtual service delivery, social media as context
 - Climate change and environmental impact as an environmental context shaping human behavior and community well-being
 - Transnational and diaspora contexts in practice with immigrant and refugee populations
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THEME 3: Human Dignity and Respect

Serving people and advancing their dignity, opportunity, and full participation in society are at the heart of the social work profession. Social work education prepares practitioners who understand that every individual deserves fair treatment and the chance to thrive; who can help people identify barriers, whether personal, institutional, or systemic, that impede access to opportunity and justice; and who can work alongside individuals and communities to overcome those barriers. Social workers guide people in identifying their life goals and in achieving them, while recognizing that many personal struggles are shaped by broader inequities that demand professional attention.

Respect is both a core value and an everyday practice in social work. Social work education grounds students in professional values of human dignity, fairness, and respect that cut across national and cultural boundaries, and prepares practitioners to apply these principles in direct service to individuals, families, and communities and to advocate for the conditions that make dignified, self-determined lives possible for all.

THEME 3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2029 EPAS

- **Sustain explicit attention to human dignity, individual rights, professional ethics, and evidence-based practice across educational policy and accreditation standards.** Educational policy and accreditation standards should continue to guide practice in the classroom and field settings to reflect the profession's commitment to enhancing the well-being of individuals and families by treating everyone with dignity and respect.
- **Encourage programs to cultivate learning environments that support student success, accessibility, and professional identity formation.** Programs should foster educational environments in which students encounter diverse viewpoints, deepen their cultural humility, engage in a rigorous curriculum, strengthen their professional identity, and participate in meaningful opportunities for dialogue, engagement, and professional growth.
- **Strengthen expectations for clear policies and procedures related to professional climate.** Accreditation standards should continue to emphasize the importance of transparent policies and procedures that support respectful, systematic learning environments and promote civility in classrooms, field settings, and the broader program environment.
- **Encourage attention to the consequences of disruptive technology on individual rights and public safety.** As technology becomes more central to practice, educational policy should reflect the importance of equal access, accountability in automated systems, and the protection of vulnerable individuals and communities in digital and technology-mediated environments.
- **Educational policy and accreditation standards should support proactive approaches to accessibility, including Universal Design for Learning, accessible instructional and assessment practices, and attention to accessibility in field education environments.** Ensuring that all students can fully participate in their education strengthens the profession and expands its capacity to serve all Americans across all communities.
- **Encourage attention to student well-being and professional development.** Programs should foster student success through advising, career support, mentoring, licensure preparation, mental health resources, and related forms of professional assistance, ensuring that graduates are workforce-ready and equipped to serve their communities effectively.

(continued)

THEME 3 KEY CURRICULAR AREAS

- Professional ethics and values: Core grounding in the profession's ethical code, human dignity, individual rights, and responsible decision-making in practice—forming the foundation of professional identity.
 - Human rights frameworks: Understanding individual rights, constitutional protections, and the legal and policy landscapes that govern practice with individuals and families.
 - Diversity of perspectives and critical thinking: Exposure to multiple viewpoints, theoretical frameworks, and evidence-based approaches that prepare students to navigate complex and contested practice environments.
 - Technology in practice: Curricula addressing the use of digital tools, electronic records, algorithmic systems, telehealth and remote service delivery, data privacy, and accountability in technology-mediated environments.
 - Policy and advocacy: Understanding how legislation, regulation, and administrative policy shape service delivery and how practitioners can engage in professional advocacy on behalf of the populations they serve.
 - Accessible and inclusive pedagogy: Application of Universal Design for Learning principles in both classroom and field settings, equipping students to serve individuals with diverse abilities and needs.
 - Field education preparedness: Structured preparation for field placements, including professional conduct, workplace civility, ethical boundaries, supervision, role clarity in agency settings, and the ability to work with diverse populations.
 - Licensure and career readiness: Explicit preparation for licensure exams, continuing education requirements, career pathways, and the transition from student to practicing professional.
 - Mental health and student well-being: Curriculum and co-curricular supports that address the emotional demands of the profession, burnout prevention, self-care, and the development of professional resilience.
 - Vulnerable populations and individual-centered practice: Practice knowledge focused on serving individuals and families experiencing poverty, disability, aging, substance use, housing instability, and other challenges, framed around client strengths and self-determination.
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Theme 4: Systemic and Structural Analysis

Effective social work practice requires the capacity to see beyond individual circumstances to the structural conditions that produce and perpetuate need. Structural analysis—the ability to identify how social, economic, legal, political, and historical systems create disparate conditions—is a core intellectual and practice skill.

This includes explicit attention to how systems such as child welfare, criminal justice, healthcare, housing, and education have historically operated to disadvantage certain populations. It requires students to understand institutional racism, ableism, heterosexism, ageism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-immigration, and other forms of systemic oppression not as individual attitudes but as embedded structural forces.

THEME 4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2029 EPAS

- **Continue to emphasize analysis of systems, institutions, and structural conditions across the curriculum.** Educational policy and accreditation standards should reinforce the importance of preparing students to analyze how policies, institutions, and social structures shape opportunities, outcomes, and lived experience, to be used in all levels of practice.
- **Encourage curricular capacity to examine structural dimensions of technology and artificial intelligence (AI).** As part of professional preparation, competencies should equip students to examine how digital systems and AI can both reproduce and disrupt inequities, including through policy, access, design, and implementation.
- **Strengthen students' understanding of how international forces shape migration patterns and domestic social conditions and service needs.** Curricula should prepare students to work effectively with populations whose circumstances are shaped by global migration, international economic shifts, and cross-border family structures. Where relevant, social work education should draw on internationally recognized practice standards and research to strengthen domestic competency and professional preparation.
- **Educational policy and accreditation standards should support the integration of current research and emerging technologies into social work education in ways that strengthen evidence-informed, ethical, and adaptable practice.**

THEME 4 KEY CURRICULAR AREAS

- Strengthen attention paid to critical thinking and analytical skills in social work education, including the cognitive and affective processes that support sound judgment, reflection, and ethical decision-making in practice.
 - Institutional oppression and structural analysis of social service systems
 - Disability rights, ableism, and the social model of disability
 - Sexuality across the lifespan and affirming practices
 - Political economy: how economic systems produce inequality
 - Organizational analysis and change within human service agencies
 - Advocacy and policy change as structural intervention
 - Curricula at each degree level will reflect clear, distinct expectations for practice preparation and professional formation. Curricular design will ensure coherence within and across degree levels, with clear articulation of how each level builds on and extends the last.
 - Generalist education at the bachelor of social work level will prepare students for broad-based practice across settings and populations.
 - Specialized master of social work education will develop specialized practice competency and advanced professional judgment.
 - Practice doctoral education will prepare students for practitioner-scholar roles as leaders in applied research, education, and policy.
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Theme 5: Preparation for Technological and Global Practice

In addition to the profession's long-standing foundations, social workers must now acquire new and expanded skills to practice effectively in a rapidly changing environment. Social work graduates are joining a practice landscape transformed by technology, globalization, and the evolving knowledge base of the profession. Contemporary practice readiness requires more than foundational skills—it requires adaptability, technological fluency, ethical sophistication, and ongoing commitment to professional development. At the same time, social workers need to understand emerging and global issues and their effects on local practices.

THEME 5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2029 EPAS

- **Establish a dedicated technology competency within the EPAS.** As digital tools become central to social work practice, accreditation standards should reflect the profession's commitment to technological fluency. A stand-alone competency would provide clear guidance for curriculum development and ensure that graduates are workforce-ready in modern service delivery environments.
- **Integrate technology skills across existing competencies.** Technological competency should be woven throughout the EPAS framework, including:
 - Professional ethics and digital conduct (Comp. 1): Expand to include technology ethics, digital professional boundaries, and responsible AI use.
 - Evidence-informed practice (Comp. 4): Prepare social workers to continuously update their technological knowledge, critically evaluate AI-informed research, and apply evidence-based solutions throughout their careers.
 - Policy practice (Comp. 5): Equip practitioners to engage with policy frameworks governing automated systems in human services, including transparency requirements, data accountability, and the impact of AI-driven decisions on service delivery.
 - Direct practice (Comp. 6–8): Train students to use AI assessment tools to supplement—not replace—professional judgment, preserving client self-determination and person-centered approaches in all intervention decisions.
- **Update field education standards to reflect technology-rich practice environments.** Field placement standards should ensure that students gain hands-on experience with the digital platforms, electronic records systems, and technology-mediated service delivery tools they will use as practicing professionals. Programs should be encouraged to cultivate field partnerships that specifically support technology-related practice readiness.
- **Expand the use of simulation and applied-learning methods.** Programs should be supported in developing skills labs, simulation exercises, and other applied-learning strategies that build competency in emerging areas of practice, including technology-mediated service delivery, telehealth, and AI-assisted assessment.
- **Strengthen preparation for cross-cultural and international practice contexts.** Social work graduates should be prepared to serve clients from diverse cultural backgrounds, and they should understand how global forces such as cultural practices, economic conditions, migration patterns, public health challenges, and technological change shape the needs and circumstances of individuals and families. Programs should prepare graduates to practice effectively and ethically across cultural contexts, adapt intervention strategies to diverse populations, and build partnerships with international organizations, governmental agencies, and community groups to promote individual well-being and sustainable outcomes.
- **Maintain and strengthen the commitment to competency-based education while investing in assessment research.** The EPAS should continue to support competency-based education while encouraging further clarification, implementation support, and research related to how competency development is operationalized and assessed across programs. Development of validated assessment instruments is recommended to strengthen program accountability and educational outcomes.
- **Preserve the distinction between professional education and prior life experience.** The existing differentiation between formal professional education and prior life experience should be maintained. Further research on competency-based assessment is recommended before any consideration of awarding academic or field credit for life experience.

(continued)

THEME 5 KEY CURRICULAR AREAS

- Curricular areas related to technology:
 - Technology foundations for practice: Core instruction in digital literacy, electronic health records, telehealth and virtual service delivery, data privacy, cybersecurity, and the responsible use of digital tools across all practice settings.
 - Artificial intelligence and automated systems in human services: Knowledge of how AI-assisted screening tools, algorithmic decision-making systems, and automated platforms are used in human services—including how to critically evaluate their outputs, understand their limitations, and maintain professional accountability in their use.
 - Responsible use of generative AI: Practical instruction in the effective and responsible use of generative AI tools, including understanding their capabilities and limitations, appropriate professional boundaries, and implications for client safety and confidentiality.
 - Technology ethics and digital professional conduct: Curricula should address digital professional boundaries, client safety on social media platforms, confidentiality in virtual environments, and the ethical obligations of practitioners operating in technology-mediated practice settings.
 - Data privacy, security, and client confidentiality: Training in the legal and regulatory frameworks governing data privacy, electronic records management, and cybersecurity as applied to social work practice and agency environments.
 - Policy and accountability in technology-driven services: Examination of how federal, state, and local policy frameworks govern the use of technology and automated systems in human services, including transparency requirements, data governance standards, and practitioner accountability structures.
 - Telehealth and virtual service delivery: Practical preparation for delivering services through telehealth platforms, including the clinical, logistical, ethical, and regulatory considerations specific to remote and hybrid service environments.
 - Curricular areas related to global preparation:
 - Cross-cultural competence and global awareness: Curricula that prepare students to serve clients from diverse cultural backgrounds; understand how global economic, political, and social forces shape individual and family circumstances; and practice effectively across cultural and national contexts.
 - Intervention strategies across diverse and international contexts: Training in a range of intervention approaches—from direct client services to program and policy development—that are effective and appropriate across domestic settings with diverse populations and international environments.
 - Simulation and applied skills development: Use of simulation, role-play, and skills lab experiences to build hands-on competency in technology-mediated practice, cross-cultural communication, and other emerging areas of professional practice.
 - Workforce readiness and continuous professional development: Preparation for the realities of practice environments, including adaptability to evolving technologies, lifelong learning commitments, and the professional responsibility to remain current with emerging tools, research, and evidence-based innovations.
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Cross-Cutting Recommendations at Program and Institutional Levels

- **Support ongoing review of degree definitions, competency expectations, and practice levels** in response to changes in the profession. Definitions and expectations related to generalist, specialized, and doctoral practice should be periodically reviewed to ensure alignment with contemporary practice environments and the evolving needs of the profession. Sustain continuous evaluation of degree nomenclature, requisite competencies, and practice standards in accordance with shifts within the profession.
 - **Encourage student support structures that reflect the realities of learners' lives.** Standards should more clearly recognize the importance of advising, student support, field design, and flexible pathways, which reflects the needs of working students, caregiving students, and other adult learners. They should promote student support structures that are reflective of the diverse realities of learners' lives.
 - Educational policy and accreditation standards should **support programs in offering varied methods of delivery** that respond to student access needs and differing life circumstances while maintaining the quality and integrity of social work education.
 - **Allow programs to use an assessment approach of their choice to evaluate the implicit curriculum, with particular attention to the learning environment, civility, and inclusivity.**
 - Educational policy and accreditation standards should **encourage programs to demonstrate that curriculum and practice preparation remain responsive to evolving workforce needs and contemporary practice demands** (e.g., mental health, trauma-informed practice, and immigration-related services).
 - **Promote stronger data and assessment infrastructure to inform decision-making.** The profession would benefit from more systematic data collection and shared access to information related to student outcomes and educational access to support evidence-informed policy development.
 - **Ongoing consideration of how field education best supports competency development, professional formation, and student success** requires further research on field education hour requirements.
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