

Poor Rigor and Political Obduracy: Which is the Horse and Which is the Cart in Social Work Education?

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Stoesz and Karger contend that the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accreditation has poorly served the profession by perpetuating an environment of low standards epitomized by the very leaders responsible for the credibility of social work as an academic discipline. Graduates are "ill-prepared" and what qualifies as scholarship in the field amounts to "the substitution of ideology for academic rigor." This author contends that Stoesz and Karger have accurately detailed relevant evidence, but have mislabeled the cause as effect. Rather, ideological directives within the CSWE standards result in lackluster scholarship. Whether or not deans and editors are the "best" the discipline has to offer, they do not view themselves as academic leaders furthering inquiry, but style themselves as military officers training recruits to accomplish objectives already established. Thus, schools of social work are implicitly constructed to attract clones for vocational indoctrination, not seriously thoughtful individuals. Racial quotas for employees further limit available high achievers.

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Stoesz and Karger's (2008) article, *Reinventing Social Work Accreditation*, provides data illustrating the poor academic achievement within not only the leadership of the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) but also leadership at the campus level. The implication of Graduate Record Examinations statistics for MSW candidates, also examined by these authors, is that low standards and low expectations result in the student demographic equally lacking with regard to peer disciplines. These comparisons provide compelling evidence that the members of our profession either possess low intellectual abilities or are not motivated to achieve.

I do not argue with the results to this point, but the authors imply that these low standards create a discipline where "ideology has trumped scholarship." I believe that Stoesz and Karger have placed the cart before the horse. Rather, the allegiance to the practiced ideology of social work, specifically, poorly defined concepts of social and economic justice, is the engine behind the lack of scholarship and corresponding poor intellectual skills.

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The CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards states one of the purposes of social work as the pursuit of "policies, services, and resources through advocacy and social or political actions that promote social and economic justice" (CSWE, 2004, p. 4).

"Social justice" is defined by the *Social Work Dictionary* as

An ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits. Implicit in this concept is the notion that historical inequalities should be acknowledged and remedied through specific measures. A key social work value, social justice entails advocacy to confront discrimination, oppression, and institutional inequities. (Barker, 2003, pp. 404-405)

As was pointed out by the National Association of Scholars (NAS), "the term 'social justice' today generally equates with the advocacy of more egalitarian access to income through state-sponsored redistribution" (NAS, 2007, p. 2). The notion that schools of social work are essentially laboratories of communism is easily identified in the training of students as advocates for policies not clients.

The Rhode Island College (RIC) Master's of Social Work syllabus states, "Students will . . . focus on social justice and the *redistribution of power and wealth* in our society . . . [and gain skills] to bring about progressive policies, programs and services in government" (RIC, 2005, p. 1, emphasis added).

Mission supplanting curriculum is not unique to RIC. In fact, the CSWE standards effectively mandate this, “Programs integrate social and economic justice content grounded in an understanding of *distributive justice*, human and civil rights, and the global interconnections of oppression” (CSWE, 2004, p. 9, emphasis added).

Some may argue that the redistributive ideal is implicit in the very idea of doing social work and thus ought to be outside the realm of criticism. But this makes several false assumptions, most glaringly that wealth is largely zero sum, implying that one’s success is the “oppression” of another that requires remedy to obtain the equilibrium of social justice.

The idea of helping people actually divides between compassion and duty and between intentions and results. No one in their right mind having observed the results of our 40-year “war on poverty” can expect even a liberal cohort of students inquiring into this history to believe that more of the same is the only solution. The structure of the academic discipline of social work instead places these critical questions outside its own purview. Little wonder it does not attract scholars; it is not scholarship, it is indoctrination.

The required devotion to the redistribution of wealth is carried into practice with the discipline’s penchant for advocacy. Stoesz and Karger recognize the organic relation of progressive advocacy and suspect scholarship in conflating the truism that “any social work student studying legislative advocacy would learn, the ultimate objective is to get a bill passed advancing the cause of the marginalized” with “social work incompetence.” As the pair note, Stanley Fish had a field day with the Emily Booker incident at Missouri State University, not because it represented poor scholarship but because advocacy is not teaching in the first place, that is, it is the absence of scholarship. It is critical to recognize a distinction between the substantively neutral teaching of the skill of advocacy and communication and the use of teaching those skills to compel ideological conformity and actual advocacy on the part of students. To have a class exercise of exposition to promote gay marriage, for instance, might be defensible, but for the Missouri State University to require a student to sign a letter actually advocating that position is more typical of the kinds of “experience learning” forced on students of social work.

Education would test rather than transmit the assumption that the government is the best place from which solutions to any and every social iniquity should be conceived and implemented. Instead, schools of social work consistently instruct their students that if they do not advocate for progressive policies favored by their professors, they are not “advancing the cause of the marginalized.”

Because of this emphasis on the procedures of wealth redistribution, it is reasonable to assume that people with certain philosophies would be excluded by rule or self-selection. As one of the students highlighted in the NAS report, I can attest to this practice. In April 2005, I was presented with the Second Year MSW Student/Field Instructor Contract. Of the 11 student objectives listed, all promoted advocacy for “progressive change” or “social/economic justice.” And just to make sure I was not misunderstanding, I asked the Intern Coordinator if this meant I needed to promote “progressive politics in order to get a degree.” He responded affirmatively, “Just like we teach.” I refused to advocate for those policies (J. Ryczek, personal communication, April 7, 2005).

The chair of the MSW department eventually notified me in writing that she could not “approve the Plan of Study (I had) developed, given (my) statement that (I) would not work on a number of the academic objectives of the concentration” (L. Olsen, personal communication, May 11, 2005). After months of negotiations, I was allowed to complete the course work but I was restricted in the subject matter I was allowed to research. The toxic subject of welfare reform was off the table.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics also dictates similar political allegiance. This is summed up well by the NAS report:

NASW’s 1997 Standard 6.01 and similar statements are, in effect, partisan declarations within these debates about policy. They take no notice of the existence of competing ideas, but grant a privileged status to a single, arguable view, which is thereby placed above critical examination. (NAS, 2007, pp. 2-3)

It should not be necessary to remind academics of the 1943 Supreme Court case *West Virginia v. Barnette* (1943) when Justice Robert Jackson proclaimed:

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

Students not highlighted in the NAS report have met similar ideological denouements. Daryle Sousa was a RIC teaching school graduate with a 3.75 GPA. After she completed an MSW application form where she asked not to perform internship duties at an abortion clinic or AIDS clinic based on her Christian beliefs, she was denied admission into the program. Her letter to then-dean decrying this decision was publicized in an article I wrote for the April 28, 2005, edition of *Front Page Magazine* (Felkner, 2005, para. 33).

In addition to discriminating against graduate candidates, allegiance to the pursuit of social justice also

limits the pool of employee candidates. The RIC School of Social Work Reaffirmation of Accreditation states in multiple instances that candidates were discriminated against because of their race, for example, "The position was searched but not filled due to the lack of qualified persons of color in the pool" (RIC SSW, 2002, p. 76).

Certainly, limiting the student or employee populations on the basis of political persuasions or race would limit access to the full population of highly capable individuals. It is also reasonable to assume that when an institution focuses on a perceived mission rather than the scholarship in its field, it will not properly nurture or attract scholars. Stoesz and Karger document the lack of academically competitive deans and editors in the field of social work by comparison to other disciplines, but offer no evidence for their first two conclusory assertions that the social work field under CSWE accreditation does not "elevate the most established scholars to leadership positions [or] appoint its most proficient academics to vet the profession's literature." Their research offers no data indicating that there are serious academics in the field being passed over for these positions.

In review of the CSWE Standards and the evidence detailed in the Stoesz and Karger article, there is no evidence of a proactive effort to limit available applicants to those who would score poorly on the Graduate Record Examination exam or who would eventually have a low publication rate. But there is evidence that the population is limited by selection of applicants based on ideology and race. This would tend to support the theory that political correctness is the horse pulling

the social work education cart. It is beyond the scope of this response to fully defend that thesis, but a tradition of scholarship as practiced and advocated by Stoesz and Karger could better solve this conundrum, as it could also give credibility to the discipline of the study of social work. For this they are to be commended.

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