

November 7, 2013

To members of COEP and COA
Council on Social Work Education

From: Terry L. Singer, Dean

Context for remarks about the proposed Policy and Standards (2015)

After more than 35 years in social work education, including two terms on both the COA and the Board, I have seen many iterations of changes. During the last changes in 2008, I provided a lot of feedback, some of which was supported and some, not. That's the nature of compromise.

I approach the new changes with some consternation about the implementation of the last standards. In written venues and public discussions, I cautioned against putting the examples of 41 practice behaviors into the standards, warning that they would be codified and suggesting that they be put into an addendum, if they were truly examples and not requirements. Phyllis Black and Wynne Korr, who headed that effort gave assurances that they were only examples and not intended as requirements. Most of the colleagues that I knew who participated in those discussions still argue that such had been their intent. The over-riding philosophy of those new standards was to create opportunity for creativity and new ways of doing social work education. Within about a year or two, those practice behaviors become "required". Regardless of how one may characterize them, they are required. That message came consistently from accreditation specialists. It was said that a program could use their own wording as long as they lined up with those practice behaviors. De facto, they became required. Programs did not want the risk of misstating some intended version of the practice behaviors as stated. It was simply easier to go along so there would be no confusion.

I do a lot of work advising programs about accreditation as well as site visitor work. Almost without exception, programs have hunkered down into elaborate measurement machines to try to capture all of the requirements. There is very little experimentation; perhaps that was the intent – to make us all the same. We can shut out eyes to the realities, but in fact, there is a great deal of intellectual dishonesty going on. In many cases, rubric scores are assigned to very complex behaviors just to achieve some measure of outcome. I have seen some programs use self-efficacy measures and field evaluation scores to establish practice behavior sufficiency, separate from any faculty evaluation. It meets the two measurement expectation, but has no essential assessment from the faculty of the program. They do what they have to do to meet the letter of the law. We are really missing the boat.

I see very similar constraints in the new standards proposal and even more requirements that have serious unintended consequences. Once more, I will try to point these out, hoping, perhaps against hope, that both Commissions can find a way to simplify requirements, establishing basic competencies, and allowing programs their own creative way to assess those competencies. I understand there are programs that want to know word-for-word what is required, much like the student who wants the cookbook approach to some practice intervention without fully understanding the theory or complexity of the intervention. We operationalize some structural approach that limits, rather than expands what social work education can be. Please consider some fundamental changes in your thinking about what our policies and standards should be.

Critique of changes

- (B2.0.3 & M2.1.4) I have already suggested in my opening section that the practice behaviors be moved to an addendum as examples, but leave it to the programs to figure out how to operationalize and measure the competencies.
- (M2.1.1 & M2.1.4) Moving to areas of specialized practice does not fix the problems of concentrations. For years, many programs used the terms, concentration and specialization, interchangeably. The 2008 standards changed that, so with much more standardization, many programs now have specializations subrogated beneath concentrations. Some

- programs use terms of art such as focused learning or specialized learning to distinguish them from fully developed specializations; that is, they may offer a few courses related to a field of practice or methods area to give students a little more subject matter in an area of interest. If you open this up using the term “area of specialized practice”, you may capture many, many “areas” that were not intended to be specializations or concentrations, and requiring an even more inordinate amount of measurement of corresponding practice behaviors. So, the required measurement becomes 32 generalist practice behaviors and 9 Competencies times 2 advanced practice behaviors times all of the areas now defined as “areas of specialized practice”. It is unmanageable.
- (2.2.4; 4.0.2; 4.0.4; and 4.0.5) In each of these standards, you introduce the concept of “program option”. It is clear from your examples provided, that you want to ensure comparability across programs, particularly the newer developing online and distance programs. The unintended consequences are immense without further clarity. First of all, there may be many program options. For example, at the University of Louisville, we have tried to meet student interest and demand by creating variations in program options that include certain days of the week, evenings, weekends, dual degrees, concentrations, specializations, full time, part time three year, part-time four year and online. There may be 20 or more program options. To expect us to measure the multiplicity of variables would be astounding. But even more complicated is that some notion of program option may be an outdated concept. Students move between the various options seamlessly in hybrid fashion. A full-time on campus student may chose a weekend or online course. Hybrid is more the rule governed by changes in learning style, family and work situations, and more. I think it is reasonable as a program introduces a radically new concept in delivery to ensure that comparability is established. When part time courses were first introduced as radical (The standards required that all programs be full time), programs had to measure for at least a decade the comparability of education before part time programs became mainstreamed. We accept change very slowly. I am asking you to more carefully define program option to avoid an assessment calamity.
 - (2.2.4) I am unclear what you mean by “majority of contact with client systems that takes place in person across program options”. Is there a problem here that is not obvious to the reader? Are there a lot of programs in which students have the majority of their client contacts other than in person? Has this standard been written to deal with one program that is using virtual realities? If the latter, I don’t know much about it, but it seems as though the future may hold options for experimentation that may lead to good outcomes. Are you simply closing the door on a future event because it is not the way we have always done it? Maybe I am missing something, but this is very unclear to me. It’s like passing a law again adopting Sharia law. Do we really need it, and if so, you should explain why better.
 - (3.2.2) I seem to remember that an old standard required the MSW plus two years to teach “required” practice courses. The thought was that there might be some advanced practice course electives like Motivational Interviewing or Equine Therapy, as examples, that could be taught by specialists in their field with relevance to social work. Is this a distinction worth looking at once again?
 - (3.2.3) This is the first I recall requiring the ratios of faculty to students. They were generally guidelines, and I can tell you from a lot of experience, everyone finesses those numbers. Where is the evidence that those numbers have any direct bearing on outcomes? Please, let’s move away from the arbitrary structural formulas for which we have no evidence of efficacy and hold programs accountable to their outcomes. If you keep this, I can assure you that the information received in self-studies will be finessed to death or simply false.
 - (B3.2.4 & M3.2.4) I guess the same argument that I made above about arbitrary numbers, now required for each program level, could hold here as well. Consider making these guidelines and ask the programs to demonstrate that they have enough resources to manage good outcomes. This standard has a political agenda, and I understand that. But truthfully, it is a

little intellectually dishonest to state that a program can only achieve its positive outcomes with these specific numbers of faculty. I also happen to believe that a critical mass of faculty is best, but I have no evidence to support what that number should be. If we are honest with ourselves, it is an arbitrary number to prevent institutions from making further cuts into our professional corpus.