



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 17
Issue 2 June

Article 7

June 1990

Back To Our Roots Towards a Specialization in Social Justice

Linda Cherrey Reeser
Western Michigan University

Leslie Leighninger
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Reeser, Linda Cherrey and Leighninger, Leslie (1990) "Back To Our Roots Towards a Specialization in Social Justice," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1940>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol17/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Back To Our Roots Towards a Specialization in Social Justice

LINDA CHERREY REESER

LESLIE LEIGHNINGER

Western Michigan University
School of Social Work

This article describes a proposed social justice curriculum and presents a case study of attempts to establish it in a graduate school of social work. The study is set in the context of the history of activism in social work and an analysis of societal and professional forces which may inhibit such activism. The rationale for a specialization in social justice is discussed along with the process and politics and developing the program and seeking its acceptance. The article describes specific types of resistance to a social change curriculum and possible strategies for dealing with such resistance.

Throughout its history, social work has declared a concern for social justice. This concern has often been expressed in a general way in the professional social work curriculum. Sometimes, as in the 1960s, curricular programs have demonstrated a more specific commitment to social justice and social change. Following the 1960s, a resurgence of conservatism led to a decline in social activism within social work and in curricular programs oriented toward social change. Recently, however, interest in such programs appears to be reemerging. It is therefore relevant to ask: What shape might a social justice curriculum take in the 1990s? Would its graduates be able to use their knowledge and skills in the social welfare arena? What are the politics of developing a social justice program in a school of social work? What are the forces shaping various reactions to such a curriculum?

This article addresses such questions through a description of a proposed social justice curriculum and a case study of attempts to establish it in a graduate social work program. The case study is set in the context of the history of activism in social work and a discussion of the societal and professional forces

which may inhibit such activism. The article discusses the rationale for a specialization in social justice at Western Michigan University's School of Social Work and the process and politics of developing the program and seeking its acceptance. It analyzes specific types of resistance to a social change curriculum and possible strategies for dealing with such resistance. Since the proposal is still in process, what we present here is an analysis of ongoing attempts to incorporate a social justice orientation in social work education.

Rationale for a Social Justice Specialization

A basic rationale for attention to social justice in the social work curriculum derives from the profession's historic commitment to fighting injustice and bettering the lives of the poor. Although this commitment has not always been dominant, and is at times more rhetoric than reality, it remains an ongoing thread in social work's history. Attempts to change economic, political, and social structures to provide equal access to resources appear in each decade of the profession's development. One can see this in the 1920s, for example, in the efforts of Grace Abbott of the U.S. Children's Bureau to enact maternal and child health legislation, despite resistance from powerful groups, including organized medicine. A commitment to social justice characterizes Isaac Rubinow's push for old age pensions and Florence Kelley's crusade for child labor legislation. The 1920s has been called the "seedtime of reform" in social welfare (Chambers, 1967; Costin, 1983, pp. 125-183). The 1930s brought its flowering. The best known proponents of social change and redistribution of wealth were members of the Rank and File union movement and their supporters, including psychiatric social worker Bertha Reynolds and Jewish agency administrator Harry Lurie. Even the more mainstream social workers of the period lobbied for legislative changes and social welfare programs to ensure more adequate economic provision for all citizens (Leighninger, 1987, pp. 51-75).

Social workers in the 1940s protested the nation's concentration on war preparedness at the expense of continued, adequate funding for social programs. In the 1950s, although social reform

efforts were less prominent, the newly developed National Association of Social Workers included a Commission on Social Policy. This Commission made recommendations in areas such as housing, health, and public welfare to the appropriate legislative and policy-making bodies (Leighninger, 1987, pp. 111–118, 200–201). Finally, in the 1960s and 1970s, social work saw the emergence of grass roots community organizing aimed at empowering poor communities, as well as advocacy approaches which sought to improve access to services for various disenfranchised groups.

The profession thus has an ongoing social justice tradition. This can be defined as a commitment to equal rights and to an equitable distribution of wealth and power among all citizens. Dennis Saleeby, in his article earlier in this issue, refers to the pursuit of social justice as “the central ontological business of social work.” This pursuit has carried through to social work practice in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, Eunice Schatz, past Executive Director of CSWE, tells of the academic vice-president who in the early 1970s warned her that the public service curriculum she was developing at a new school of social work was an outdated one. “Eunice, the 60’s are over! Your curriculum reflects the past, not the future.” Dr. Schatz disagreed. The new curriculum addressed issues of empowerment, advocacy, poverty, equality, and civil rights. Dr. Schatz told the vice-president: “in Social Work, issues of equality and social justice are not concerns that fit between the two decades of the fifties and the seventies. They are what the profession is all about” (*Social Work Education Reporter*, 1988, p. 11).

Dr. Schatz is not alone in this conviction. A survey of 60 graduate schools of social work in 1986 indicated that 37% had a concentration or specialization in community organization, social justice, or social development. Ten schools required all students to take a community organization course. Fifteen required students in the macro concentration to take such a course. Half of the schools surveyed offered at least one course with a social justice emphasis, such as “Social Welfare and the Disadvantaged” or “Strategies for Social Change.”¹

More recently, increases in enrollments in social work graduate schools have been cited by journalists and others as a

sign that social concerns are again becoming popular. Schools of Social Work at Howard University and Catholic University are experimenting with social action curricula and research centers. The newly revised bylaws of the Council on Social Work Education state one of the organization's major purposes as "stimulating the development of knowledge, practice and service effectiveness designed to promote social justice and further community and individual well being" (CSWE Bylaws, 1989, p. 1). The Council's Strategic Plan stresses that "Social justice . . . shall permeate all program activities," and includes concern with social justice issues as one of the functions of the Commission on Educational Policy Concerns and Standards (1989, pp. 10, 12-13).

Such moves within social work education are mirrored by changes in the profession. The National Association of Social Work has an active Social Workers for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament Committee. While clinical work remains a favored area in social work, Wakefield (1988), and Rose's work in this issue, demonstrate the relevance of a social justice orientation to clinical practice.² In addition, Reisch and Wenocur (1986) note the growth of grass roots organizing activities in the past decade. While recognizing that much of this organizing is taking place outside of social work, Reisch and Wenocur note that social workers are becoming more involved in coalitions representing labor, church groups, the women's movement, etc. Such coalitions signify a shift in community organizing from a narrow politics of self-interest to concern with broad, long-term social change.

The School of Social Work at Western Michigan University

In line with social work's commitment to social change, a specialization in social justice has been proposed for graduate students in the School of Social Work at Western Michigan University. The University is located in the city of Kalamazoo, a community in southwest Michigan halfway between Chicago and Detroit. The city has a population of 90,000, within a metropolitan area of over 200,000 residents. The University has a regional focus, with students coming primarily from southwest Michigan and Indiana.

The School of Social Work has an undergraduate Bachelor of Social Work program as well as a part-time and full-time Master of Social Work (MSW) program. There are 18 faculty and 240 graduate students enrolled in the School. In addition, the School has a part-time off-campus program in Grand Rapids. Minority students constitute 10% of the graduate student body.

The MSW degree program consists of two components, the foundation for social work practice and advanced study (concentrations). All students are required to take Foundation courses (primarily in the first year) and must choose one of two concentrations, Social Treatment (ST) or Policy, Planning and Administration (PP&A). Currently, about 80% of the students elect the ST concentration.

The financial climate for public universities in Michigan is not a rosy one. While faculty lay-offs have not occurred, tight budgets have made acquisition of resources for expanding or new programs difficult.

Description of Proposed Social Justice Specialization

The proposed program is a specialization in Social Justice/Community Organization which would be an option to the concentrations in ST or PP&A.³ The decision to include social justice as part of the title of the specialization is based on the intent to focus the curriculum on the distribution of resources such that each individual in society has his/her basic needs met as well as the opportunity to reach his/her full potential as a human being. The program is based on the assumption that many crucial human problems such as poverty, racism, and sexism are linked and rooted in institutional structures and the socioeconomic order. Thus, it emphasizes collective, long-range solutions toward fundamental social change and adaptation of systems to human needs. It also recognizes that social workers need to help people meet their immediate needs. The courses are designed as much to develop students' critical consciousness as to learn social change strategies.

The assumptions and focus of this specialization are in agreement with Gil's arguments elsewhere in this issue. Gil critiques the "dominant" social welfare theories for assuming

that human problems are rooted primarily within individuals and for proposing individual change and adjustment to the existing system. He proposes alternative theories that recognize social structural sources of problems and view all problems as linked. He argues for a "liberating education" that focuses on developing students' critical consciousness and facilitation empowerment.

The goals of the social justice specialization are to help students: (a) develop tools for the analysis of the political, economic, and social structure of society and an understanding of how these structures lead to oppression; (b) acquire a vision of the necessary elements of a just society which will foster the provision of the basic needs of all members of that society and promote the realization of the full potential of that society's people. Emphasis is on the student developing and articulating his/her own vision; (c) develop an understanding of the power of the people to change unjust structures and develop the skills necessary for leadership in the empowerment of people to move towards a just society.

These goals are supportive of Gil's framework for "social-change-oriented practice" and Saleebey's social justice principles. The first goal of developing tools for analysis will include understanding the connections between the personal and the political, and theories and process focusing on the dialectical person/environment interchange. The second goal of acquiring a vision of a just society will include exploring various theories of social justice, alternative social systems, and reviewing the U.S. history of social change efforts. We make an assumption that is echoed by Gil that practice cannot be politically neutral, nor can it be value-neutral. Practice either challenges the status quo or supports it. Social workers should choose and openly acknowledge their political philosophy and visions for the socio-economic system. The third goal of learning about empowerment and how to empower will entail students gaining an understanding that change can come from the bottom up, developing specific social change and empowerment skills, and learning how to impart these skills to others.

We have proposed three courses based on the goals of the specialization: a theoretical "Foundations of Social Justice"

course and two community organization practice courses. Students would also have a two-semester social justice/community organization field placement. Two of the School's Foundation courses, one on social change and one on racial and cultural dynamics in social work practice, provide important background to the specialization. For example, the social change course provides students with content on Marxist conflict theory, systems theory, community analysis, history of social work's commitment to social change, ideology perspectives on social change, and change strategies such as revolution, nonviolent direct action, advocacy, political action and conscientization.

The "Foundations of Social Justice" course would present different analyses of the nature of a just society, critical aspects of the rapidly changing world context, the historical record of the U.S.' attitudes and action with regard to social justice, elements of U.S. political-economy and culture and an analysis of social movements (e.g., women, labor). The course provides some of the content Gil suggests is necessary for a social change-oriented curriculum. The authors are in agreement with Gil that social movements are necessary for fundamental social change and that social work practitioners and educators can contribute to the development of these movements. Thus, understanding social movements and what they have accomplished, as well as learning to organize movements at the local, state, and national levels are cornerstones of this social justice curriculum.

In the two proposed methods courses, community organization is interpreted broadly and is not limited to the grass roots' organizing of the 1960s. Community organization is defined as a range of short- and long-term strategies to empower people, including advocacy, consciousness raising, networking, coalition-building, community development, neighborhood organizing, lobbying, electoral politics, direct action, fund raising, community education and use of "think tanks." The first course addresses such fundamentals of organizing as the role of the organizer, context, goals, approaches to organizing at the local level, how to build and maintain an organization, work with the government and business, research, and use of the media. The second course on skills in advanced organizing places emphasis

on issue organizing rather than organizing on the basis of gender, race, age or class lines. Current examples of issue organizing will be addressed (e.g., homelessness, health care) with regard to theory, successes, failures, and alternative approaches. Current examples of the organizing approaches of advocacy groups (e.g., Children's Defense Fund, Association for Retarded Citizens); research groups/think tanks (e.g., American Enterprise Institute, Center for the Study of Poverty); lobbying/pressure groups (e.g., Bread for the World, Common Cause); and electoral groups (e.g., National Rainbow Coalition, Democratic Socialists of America) will be utilized to teach skill development. Another focus of the course is learning to organize in different arenas (e.g., human service agencies, churches, labor unions).

Various field placement opportunities were explored for the two-semester social justice field requirement. One example is Habitat for Humanity, a Christian ministry of housing that attempts to provide decent housing for people in need. Habitat would use a student to do outreach to obtain support, labor, and supplies from community groups and churches; to evaluate potential clients for housing; to develop policies; to build housing; and, do community development. Another agency would use social justice students to assist with the welfare reform coalition at the state level by facilitating the participation of local grass roots groups and low income people, making visible local concerns to legislators and policy makers to effect change, working with the media to educate the public, and doing social equity analyses of policies and the tax system. The YWCA Sexual Assault Program, a counseling and advocacy organization, might interest those students who plan to concentrate in social treatment. Students in this internship could be involved in crisis counseling, court watch for victims of sexual assault, and advocacy for change at the local and state levels.

The social justice specialization would train people for a variety of positions, including: issue-oriented community organizer; community development worker; counselor/advocate in domestic assault, sexual assault, homeless shelter, or similar programs; lobbyist; and staff member in a state or national advocacy organization. In organizations dealing with issues of discrimination and oppression, there is a need for workers who

combine interpersonal skills, proficiency in advocacy and organizing techniques, and competence in fund raising, budget management, and grant writing. A combination of the Foundation social work curriculum, a Social Justice specialization, and course work in PP&A is a good way to meet this need.

History of the Social Justice
Specialization Proposal at Western
Michigan University's School
of Social Work

How easy has it been to develop and gain acceptance for a social justice specialization within the school of social work? Despite a more receptive climate within the profession, resource difficulties and ideological and philosophical differences have made creation of the new program a demanding task. This section summarizes the history of the idea for a social justice specialization and the steps taken to gain its legitimacy.

Four years ago, Western Michigan University's social work faculty generated a set of priorities for curricular change. A major mandate emerged for a "deepening of advocacy for social justice and human rights; connections between social systems, poverty, and oppression; and more content on social change." A Social Justice Task Force of five faculty members and a student was formed to work on a proposal to implement this mandate. Several of the Task Force members regularly taught courses on community organization and social change. Only one member taught in a second year concentration sequence.

The Task Force used a number of strategies to develop a social justice curriculum and to create a receptive atmosphere for its implementation. Although faculty had given high ranking to attention to social justice issues in the curriculum, some no doubt envisioned infusion rather than an autonomous program. From the beginning, Task Force members believed a discrete program was necessary to give visibility to a social justice/social change thrust and to train students in specific organizing skills.

As a first step, the Task Force met with representatives from local agencies and organizations that had a social justice orientation (such as advocacy agencies for the homeless and those with developmental disabilities, a welfare reform group, and a

community development organization). The goals of this meeting were (a) to gain external support for a social justice specialization in order to increase internal support among faculty, and (b) to discover if there were appropriate social justice field placements and job opportunities in the local community for graduates. Discussion with agency representatives confirmed the existence of potential field placements and job opportunities. It also brought home to Task Force members the importance of teaching students a wide variety of skills in addition to community organizing, including conflict management, lobbying, budgeting, and grant writing. The new social change practitioner would have to have a combination of community organizing, planning, administrative capabilities, and interpersonal skills.

The Task Force took two other steps to gain legitimacy for a social justice program and to gather ideas on how to shape such a program. One was to survey the curricula of other schools of social work to ascertain the frequency and types of social justice courses and programs. The results, reported above, gave further credence to the goal of creating a specific social justice curriculum.

The third project was the development of a Social Justice Conference. The Task Force saw this conference as meeting several goals: raising consciousness, both in the university and surrounding communities, about the need to address the pressing issues of homelessness, discrimination, unemployment, and other problems; testing the waters for regional interest in a social justice specialization in the school of social work; and gaining legitimacy for such a program among university and school colleagues and administrators. The conference was publicized among Master's and Baccalaureate social work programs, social welfare agencies, and advocacy organizations in a three-state area: Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana. Funding was solicited and received from other University departments, the school, and the President of the University. The conference featured major speakers on social activism, including Michael Harrington, and offered workshops on social issues and social change, utilizing panels of key activists, organizers, and policy experts from the local community.

Over 250 people attended the conference, a number well above expectations. Participants included a large number of

students, both from the host university and other schools in the region. The conference created an excitement about social justice issues among faculty and students in Western Michigan University's School of Social Work, and seemed to bring more credibility to the project within the larger university.

Buoyed by the conference success, the Task Force turned to creation of a specific curriculum proposal for a social justice program. From the very beginning of this process, the Task Force struggled with the question of whether to propose an essentially autonomous, methods based concentration that would parallel the existing two second year concentrations, or whether to attempt to integrate a smaller program, or specialization, within one or both of the existing concentrations. Issues of resource availability, compatibility of program goals with those of the other concentrations, and possible competition over a finite number of students made this a difficult question to resolve. In fact, the specialization/concentration debate (with its underlying resource and goal compatibility issues) has dominated program development and lack of resolution has been a major obstacle to getting a program in place. A major issue has been the difficulty in reconciling the goals of each concentration — i.e., to produce a skilled clinical practitioner or administrator/planner — with the goal of the specialization — creation of a social worker with additional community organizing skills and a focus on social change.

Within the Task Force, there was ambivalence over the specialization/concentration issue. While the group wanted a strong, "full-fledged" social justice concentration, it realized that such a program might be perceived as threatening the resources and student enrollments of the other concentrations. This issue was particularly pertinent regarding the PP&A program, which has a much smaller pool of interested students than the clinical program, and therefore conceivably has the most to lose in competition with a third concentration. Concerned about such competition and the tight budget constraints facing the school, the Task Force decided to prepare a curriculum proposal for a social justice specialization that could be integrated into the existing concentrations. An additional advantage to the integration approach was its potential for creating the multiskilled

social justice practitioner (e.g. one with capabilities in both community organizing and program planning, or community organizing and clinical practice) that the job market seemed to favor.

Accordingly, the Task Force developed a program in which students would take the specific social justice courses described earlier, in addition to enrolling in one of the concentrations. Their second year field placement would be in an agency involved in social justice activities within a policy/planning or social treatment setting. The Task Force also gathered further information on job and field placement opportunities, especially for practitioners who could combine community organizing with other skills.

Before presenting the plan at the school's annual Spring Faculty Retreat, the Task Force met with ST and PP&A concentration faculty to receive input. While both groups saw merit in the proposal, a major concern emerged over the attempt to accommodate social justice students in the concentration-oriented field work assignments. In other words, the concentrations' sense of accountability for producing full-fledged practitioners in ST or PP&A made them wary of "diluting" the placement experience by adding social justice tasks and assignments. Since the PP&A program is particularly oriented to the execution of classroom assignments in the field setting, its faculty were especially reluctant to change or delete some of these assignments for the social justice students. Yet without this accommodation, the social justice students would lack time for practicing community organizing skills.

The Task Force hoped that presentation of the proposed specialization at the Retreat would allow for group problem-solving of these and other issues. At the Retreat, the plan was described to the entire faculty. Faculty then met in small groups instructed by the Task Force to discuss strengths, obstacles, and ways to overcome obstacles. The major strength identified by group members was the connection between social justice themes and the social action roots of social work. Faculty were also impressed with the Task Force's approach of seeking community feedback and support for the specialization.

The obstacles identified at the Retreat have become common themes and reactions to the social justice specialization up to

the present day. One theme is resource problems. Should the school commit resources, time, and energy to a social justice program rather than other interests, including expansion of the part-time off-campus program? Another question, already described, was whether to make the program a specialization or a concentration.

Confusion over the meaning and goals of "community organization" was an additional problem. A number of faculty identified community organizing with the local grass roots organizing and confrontational politics of the 1960s, and asked whether these were relevant in the 1980s. Some felt that existence of a special social justice program implied that the rest of the faculty were not teaching about social justice issues in their classrooms. Did the design of the specialization suggest that there was only one appropriate social justice vision or ideology? Finally, some faculty worried that the university administration would not approve the specialization because they would see it as too radical.

Beyond ideological and political concerns, the immediate stumbling blocks to acceptance of the proposal were the problem of resources and the concern of the concentrations that they preserve enough time in the curriculum to impart the necessary knowledge and skills to their graduates. A breakthrough came when a faculty member suggested that Social Justice become a first-year specialization. The first year of the school's program is a generic one, and a variety of placements are used. These include several social justice settings. Although some drawbacks to the plan were pointed out, the idea seemed a viable compromise. Faculty voted to accept the plan in progress, and the Task Force was asked to present detailed course outlines and a finalized program plan to the school Curriculum Committee the following fall.

However, the breakthrough and compromise achieved at the Retreat proved to be short-lived. Some problems quickly presented themselves in discussions among Task Force members. If the program began in the first year, could enough students be recruited? (The group had intended to recruit students from the first year class, in the same way that the concentrations do.) In addition, all of the social justice courses would not fit into the

first year, so students would be learning particular content *after* taking the field work course in which it could be applied.

Furthermore, the political, definitional, and resource objections raised during the Retreat reemerged in the Curriculum Committee's reactions to the finalized course proposals. Committee members debated whether the model of community organization presented in the course outlines was an appropriate one. While a concept of community organization was articulated that included advocacy and community development, a number of faculty continued to criticize the approach as outdated 1960s style grass-roots organizing. Several seemed concerned that the social justice specialization was a means for finding a place in the curriculum for "radical social work."

It also proved difficult to find space in the school's tightly structured curriculum for the social justice courses. Even with the use of the scant available elective space, some social justice students would have to take extra hours in order to complete both specialization and concentration. At one point, some faculty suggested that the school drop its one existing required social change course in order to allow space for the new specialization. (Task Force members successfully argued that this idea ran counter to the initial charge to increase attention to social justice within the curriculum.) Finally, the problem of scarce resources has continued to block efforts to create a reasonable program.

Despite two more years of proposals, committee meetings, and even some school-wide attempts to restructure the curriculum, the issues blocking implementation of a social justice program remain unresolved. Perhaps if there had been only one major area of difficulty, negotiations and problem-solving could have been more immediately fruitful. Yet the combination of political concerns, scarcity of resources, perceived competition with the existing concentrations, and a tightly structured curriculum have combined to make the development of a social justice curriculum an uphill battle.

Larger Forces Shaping the Response to a Social Justice Specialization

What are the larger forces which may be influencing the reactions to a proposed social justice specialization at Western

Michigan University? These larger forces may in fact inhibit most schools of social work from even trying to build social justice courses or programs into their curriculum. This state of affairs may be explained by Gil's description of the "conservative tendencies" to preserve the status quo which have been a part of the "public consciousness" of the United States since its inception. Saleebey speculates that this conservatism is a result of either the perceived accomplishment or failure of the liberal agenda. He argues that public morality now reflects the dominance of the marketplace. Saleebey decries the profession's "social amnesia" or individualizing of social problems.

The conservative mentality has been regarded as pervasive in social work. One explanation advanced is that social work's striving for professional status has resulted in the search for clients who could elevate its status and in a loss of commitment to social activism. Bisno (1956, pp. 14-16) suggested that the existence of "strong professional strivings for higher status" within social work may have led to efforts to attract a more prestigious class of clientele. He was afraid this would result in social work abandoning its commitment to social reform. Cloward and Epstein (1965, p. 3) also argue that the pursuit of professionalization has led social work to "disengagement from the poor." Walsh and Elling (1972) empirically demonstrated that members of public health occupational groups who were actively striving to gain higher status were more negative in their orientation toward low income clients than were members of occupations who were less active. It may be that aspiring professions are conservative because they put their energy into "acquiring the status symbols of the old-line professions (e.g., private practice) (Benthrop, 1964, p. 16) and into pursuing political action that will increase their status and power (e.g., licensing, obtaining third party payment status) (Wagner and Cohen, 1978).

Another force that may be influencing the resistance to a social justice specialization is the content of social work. The dominant "psychosocial" social work theories tend to view individuals as the problem and to focus on personal solutions rather than structural change. This psychosocial approach views the environment as "social networks rather than social order" (Galper, 1975, p. 122) and, thus, takes the social order as a given.

There are theorists who view social work theory and practice as inherently conservative (see Heraud, 1973; Galper, 1975; Wagner and Cohen, 1978; Wilding, 1982). Casework, the dominant social work method, is often regarded as the conservative, social control emphasis of the profession (Rein, 1970, pp. 20–21).

Up until the 1960s, the primary objectives of community organization were fund-raising, planning, and coordination of services. Even though community organizing became more reform-oriented in the 1960s, community organizers are still criticized for doing "sociotherapy" to make people feel better rather than to bring about social change (Rein, 1970; Galper, 1975). Nevertheless, community organization has been the one method in social work most directly identified with the effort to engage in social reform.

The social justice specialization may be encountering resistance because it would teach students alternative theories and methods to resist the social control function of social work and engage in social change. It challenges the conservative, apolitical bias of social work. As Gil notes in this volume, "universities, and, especially professional schools, tend to prepare students for 'successful' adaptation to established ways of life and for assumption of appropriate roles and positions, rather than for critical consciousness. . . ."

Another possible conservatizing force influencing social work education is the notion of the professional as an expert technician. The professional norm of functional specificity has been associated with fostering a preoccupation with technique at the expense of social reform. Galper (1975, pp. 91–92) argued that a consequence of this norm is that the client is not viewed as a whole person and is seen only in terms of the problem he or she has; solutions to the problem are seen as the techniques of the profession rather than requiring structural social change. The result is that expertise is substituted for political action.

It may be that resistance to a social justice specialization stems from concern that it is not professional and not in the domain of social work, and therefore, will hurt the credibility of social work in the marketplace. During the 1960s, there were professional job opportunities for community organizers (e.g., community mental health, settlement houses) and the numbers

of students in social work schools who concentrated in community organization grew dramatically. In the 1970s, the number of these jobs declined. Today there are employment opportunities in community organization, but many are outside of traditional social work settings, are not well paid, and do not require an M.S.W. degree. People are being trained as community organizers primarily in institutes not affiliated with professional social work schools (Reisch and Wenocur, 1986).

In an era of shrinking resources, there are market pressures on social work to distinguish itself as having a unique and systematized knowledge and scientifically based methodology. Casework and clinical social work are the dominant social work commodities being sold. This may be because casework is regarded as "the most highly professionalized method of social work practice" (Kadushin, 1959). Community organization may be regarded as hurtful to the professionalization of social work because of the difficulty in distinguishing "between the political and reform activities of community organizers and the broader arena of politics outside of social work" and between "the full-time, paid organizers efforts of social workers from the part-time, voluntary efforts of their colleagues in the same spheres of activity" (Reisch and Wenocur, 1986, p. 71).

A final factor that may account for community organization not gaining acceptance as a specialization is that in a time of budget cuts in higher education it has to compete for resources with other programs in schools of social work. At WMU, it must compete with the ST and PP&A concentrations. There are limited resources available in the university just as there is a scarcity of resources available for human well-being during this conservative era. The competition for resources reinforces the status quo and community organization loses out as a luxury that cannot be afforded.

Conclusion

The Task Force remains in the process of problem-solving in order to gain acceptance of a social justice specialization. Although we have not yet established a program, we have had successes along the way, such as an effective Social Justice Conference, protection of the existing course on social change,

and approval for a new required course on Race and Culture in Social Work Practice (an idea suggested by our survey of the curricula of other schools of social work).

Attempts to introduce a social justice program have made us aware of ideological differences, competing demands for resources, competition for students, and varying conceptions of social justice. As we continue to work on the project, we will try to meet more often and brainstorm in small groups with faculty who have questions about the proposal. We will also pursue outside funding. While keeping in mind the political realities discussed earlier, we will attempt to use a "win-win" strategy, based on the following assumptions: "all needs are legitimate," "resources can be generated," and "it is possible to learn to trust ourselves and others" (Gerstein, 1986, pp. 12-21).

It is important to work for expansion of social justice content in the curriculum. Such content renews social work's commitment to its own heritage. It provides social work students with options for careers in, or a practice emphasis on social justice. It has potential for fostering the successful participation of social workers in the social arena to develop a progressive human services agenda.

Endnotes

1. This survey was carried out in Winter 1988 by the Social Justice Task Force of the School of Social Work, Western Michigan University.

2. See Stephen M. Rose and Bruce L. Black, *Advocacy and empowerment: Mental health care in the community*, Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985 for a fuller discussion of a clinical social work shaped by a radical perspective, with particular attention to the role of case manager/advocate in the mental health system.

3. The specialization was labeled Social Justice/Community Organization because the primary methodology to be taught is community organization. We will continue to refer to it here as the social justice specialization.

References

- Benthrop, W.C. (1964). The professions and the means test. *Social Work*, 9, 10-17.
- Bisno, H. (1956). How social will social work be? *Social Work*, 1, 12-18.
- Cloward, R.A. & Epstein, I. (1965). Private social welfare disengagement from the poor: The case of private family and adjustment agencies. *Proceedings of the Annual Social Work Day Institute*. Buffalo, NY: State University of New York at Buffalo.

- Chambers, C.A. (1987). *Seedtime of reform*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Costin, L.B. (1983). *Two sisters for social justice: A biography of Grace and Edith Abbott*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 125–183.
- Council on Social Work Education (1989). *Bylaws*.
- (1989). *Strategic plan*.
- Galper, J. (1975). *The politics of social services*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Heraud, B.F. (1973). Professionalism, radicalism, and social change. In P. Halmos (Ed.), *Professionalisation and social change* (pp. 85–101). The University of Keele, Keele, England, *The Sociological Review Monograph*, 20.
- Kadushin, A. (1959). The knowledge base of social work, In A.J. Kahn (Ed.), *Issues in American social work* (pp. 53–58). NY, Columbia University Press.
- Leighninger, L. (1987). *Social work: Search for identity*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Rein, M. (1970). Social work in search of a radical profession. *Social Work*, 15, 13–28.
- Reisch, M. and Wenocur, S. (1986). The future of community organization in social work: Social activism and the politics of profession building. *Social Service Review*, 60, 70–93.
- The Social Work Education Reporter* (1988). Special Edition, 88–650–02.
- Wagner, P. & Cohen, M.B. (1978). Social workers, class, and professionalism. *Catalyst*, 1, 15–55.
- Wakefield, J.C. (1988). Psychotherapy, distributive justice, and social work, Part I: Distributive justice as a conceptual framework for social work. *Social Service Review*, 62, 187–210.
- Psychotherapy, distributive justice, and social work, Part II: Psychotherapy and the pursuit of justice. *Social Service Review*, 62, 353–382.
- Walsh, J.L. & Elling, R.H. (1972). Professional and the poor—structural effects and professional behavior. In E. Freidson & J. Lorber (Eds.), *Medical men and their work*. Chicago, Aldine Atherton, 267–283.
- Wilding, P. (1982). *Professional power and social welfare*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

