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ELECTIVES AND UNDERGRADUATE SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION
IN A STATE UNIVERSITY

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From the beginning of its interest in undergraduate instruction, the Council on Social Work Education has stressed the importance of a broad liberal education for baccalaureate social workers.¹ Such emphasis was restated twice in subsequent CSWE documents,² and more recently in other materials which enunciate the standards for the new undergraduate accreditation process commencing in 1974.³ It is much easier to state the notion of a general education than it is to describe its content and character and there is a tendency to become ambiguous. We are prone to resort to a high level of generalization in characterizing a "general education" and in delineating its parameters. When discussants do achieve specificity and become explicit, then lack of consensus often appears, e.g., should or should it not include foreign language, the fine arts, natural science, and so forth. It is nonetheless important that serious consideration be given to this matter since the majority of social workers in the nation continue to be persons holding only the undergraduate degree.

In the study reported here there has been the attempt to examine what content, in fact, has been part of the student's formal work as an undergraduate. No presumption is made that such courses collectively constitute an ideal liberal education, whatever that may be, but rather hopefully it will be instructive as to what has happened recently in one social work program in a school which purports to be liberal arts in orientation and is, perhaps, fairly representative of baccalaureate programs. The question is restricted to formalized courses per se, not because this is all of education within a college or university nor necessarily the majority of it, but because it is easiest and most feasible to objectify and survey. This writer is convinced that much education and learning, perhaps most, takes place outside the academic paraphernalia of courses, classrooms, texts, and lectures, but this larger experience almost escapes measurement because of its fluid and open qualities.

SETTING AND PROGRAM

In 1973, an analysis was made of the records of all students majoring in social work who graduated with the Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1971 and 1972. There were 195 such persons, 91 the first year and 104 the second. The University enrolls approximately

¹Council on Social Work Education, Social Welfare Content in Undergraduate Education, New York, Council on Social Work Education, 1962.

²Council on Social Work Education, Undergraduate Programs in Social Welfare, pp. 7-10, 17; New York, Council on Social Work Education, 1967.

³Social Work Education Reporter, Vol. 21, No. 3 (September, 1973), "Standards for the Accreditation of Baccalaureate Degree Programs in Social Work," p. 13, New York, Council on Social Work Education.

20,000 students totally. Included in the institution are undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs organized as the Colleges of Business Administration, Dentistry, Engineering, Law, Liberal Arts, Medicine, Nursing, and Pharmacy. The School of Social Work with graduate M.S.W. and undergraduate B.A. programs is located within the College of Liberal Arts along with six other schools and a large number of departments.

Students in the University have the following basic requirements if working toward a B.A. degree:

Basic Skills--rhetoric--eight hours (two semesters)

physical education--four hours (usually two semesters)

mathematics--one course for students with less than 2½ years of high school math and a standard score below 23 in the mathematics section of the ACT tests.

Foreign Language--two years (12 to 14 hours), unless reduced by prior study in high school.

Core Areas--eight hours (two semesters) in each of the following:

(1) historical-cultural, (2) natural science, (3) literature.

A fourth core area in social science, required of students generally, is waived for those majoring in social work because of social science courses specifically required for this major, e.g., sociology.

Because the above are general liberal arts requirements they are uniform for all students, although offering a number of options particularly in each of the core fields, and they were not included in this survey.

What was not known at the outset of this study was what courses students take as electives and to fill out areas of concentration in conjunction with the major. It was the purpose of the study to ascertain these in order to have solid information about student's actual education rather than general impressions. The requirements for a social work major at the University of Iowa have been revised and expanded since the time these students were in school but, during 1971 and 1972, a student in this field was required to take four introductory courses in the social and behavioral sciences, one each in sociology, psychology, political science and economics. The required social welfare and social work courses included an introductory survey course, Social Welfare Program and Policy, Social Work Methods, and Field Experience. Other offerings in social work were available on an elective basis. Finally, students took fifteen hours in one single department of their choice from the following twelve alternatives and six hours from the other group, either social sciences or humanities.

<u>Social Sciences</u>		<u>Humanities</u>	
Anthropology	Polit. Science	Amer. Civilization	History
Economics	Psychology	English	Philosophy
Geography	Sociology	European Literature and Thought	Religion

Which specific courses are taken within the fifteen and six hour concentrations are up to the student, although a list of recommended courses is available for student use and consideration. In practice, sociology and psychology are by far the most common choices for the fifteen-hour emphasis and hence the other six hours are usually distributed within the humanities.

In simplified terms, the rationale for the requirements of the social work major include the development of basic knowledge and skills in social welfare and social work, fundamental concepts and principles in the social and behavioral disciplines, strength in at least one related or relatable area outside of social work, and the extension of a liberal education from the perspective of social welfare and social work. Because these are the objectives of the social work major per se they are superimposed on the University's basic general education requirements applicable to all B.A. candidates. In other words, there is strong conviction within the School of Social Work as to the importance of the liberal arts even to the extent of adding requirements of a general nature to the already substantial ones of the University. The School gives more than a nod to the broader education of social work majors, a stance supported by some research.⁴ This leads to a position that social work courses should be limited in number, that the focus in the program should be preparation for practice as generalists, and that the student's general education must be protected.

This rationale is seen as compatible with and essential to a program with diverse students and goals, including preparation for beginning practice, graduate education in social work and other professions, employment in related human service occupations, and for effective citizenship participation and leadership. Of these, preparation for practice is seen as primary.

FINDINGS

For most students majoring in social work, the program as described leaves some room, often considerable, for electives. This is purposeful in that the social work faculty and students as well as central administration in the University hold to the importance of flexibility and individualization as reflected in elective opportunities. Within the 124 hours required for graduation, the vast majority of students have at least twenty-four hours of electives after completing all of the previously mentioned requirements, including those for the major. Many students, if not most, have even more than this. It is these purely elective courses as well as the non-social work fifteen-hour area of concentration required for the major that provided the subject for the survey. In a sense, the latter fifteen hours may also be thought of as electives in that the student is entirely free to choose whatever courses are desired as long as they are within one department selected from the twelve prescribed. Multiplicity of courses and departments from which to pick represents still further student choice. Courses utilized for the six-hour requirement were not analyzed due to their smaller scope.

Listed in order of frequency, elective courses taken by the 195 social work graduates were from the following departments and programs:

⁴ Sidney Berengarten, Admissions Prediction and Student Performance in Social Work Education, New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1964, pp. 40-44.

Number of Registrations of Social Work Majors by Area

Sociology*	714	Journalism	45
Psychology	521	Mathematics	41
Education	226	Core ⁵	40
Anthropology	185	Speech and	
Home Economics	131	Dramatic Art	35
History	86	Business Administration	35
Geography	74	Child Development	29
Religion	68	American Civilization	28
Music	58	Philosophy	27
Political Science*	58	Economics	24
Art	48	Physical Education	23
English	48	TOTAL	<u>2541</u>

*In addition to an introductory course which is a specific requirement for the major and therefore was not included as an elective.

Less frequently taken courses were:

Spanish	20	Physics and Astronomy	5
Military Science	19	Latin	4
Recreation	17	Microbiology	4
Urban and Regional		German	3
Planning	14	Zoology	3
French	12	Russian	3
Library Science	12	Anatomy	2
Chemistry	9	Chinese & Orient. Studies	2
Nursing	8	Italian	2
European Literature		Linguistics	2
and Thought	8	Physiology	2
Gerontology	8	Psychiatry	2
Pharmacology	7	Other ⁶	5
Greek	6	TOTAL	<u>182</u>

No courses were listed on the graduates' academic records from the following departments and programs in the College of Liberal Arts: Botany, Museum Training, Comparative Literature, and General Science.

The information reported thus far is unrefined and raises additional questions. For example, the fact that these graduates of the University studied more sociology and psychology than any other fields outside of social work is noteworthy but probably not surprising. But which courses in these departments were being chosen from the dozens available? it could be argued that in some cases there is as much diversity, if not more, among course offerings within one department as between departments. Therefore a further step was taken and the records processed to break down the wholesale groupings into specific courses to ascertain more detailed information. This was done in each of the five departments in which students had taken the largest number of courses: sociology,

⁵Core courses used as electives after core requirements completed.

⁶One course each in Geology, Pharmacy, Physical Therapy, Portuguese, Speech Pathology.

psychology, education, anthropology, and home economics, and is shown in the following compilations.

SOCIOLOGY

By far the largest number of courses elected by the social work students came from sociology, which is a department entirely separate from the School of Social Work. In order of frequency, such courses are enumerated below. These are in addition to the introductory course which, as noted previously, was a requirement.

Number of Students Completing Selected Sociology Courses

Social Problems	111	Race and Ethnic Relations	29
Criminology	102	The Urban Community	25
Juvenile Delinquency	71	Theory, Research and Statistics	18
Principles of Social Psychology	66	Social Psychology of Alcohol Use and Community Problems	17
Population and Society	37	American Society	16
Sociology of the American Family	33	Social Stratification	14
		Other (40 courses)	175

From a social work point of view, it is important to note that many of the utilized sociology courses related at least to some degree to social problems, e.g., Social Problems, Criminology, Juvenile Delinquency, Population, American Family, Race Relations, Urban Community, Alcohol Use, Social Stratification. By contrast, except for introductory level courses, fewer courses were selected in the areas of social theory, social psychology, social institutions, social change, community and population. This is true in spite of the fact that the latter, along with social problems, are all sociology department curriculum groupings which contain courses on the undergraduate level. There is the suggestion that since social work is an applied discipline, students from this field may choose courses they perceive as more "practical" and relevant.

PSYCHOLOGY

Somewhat fewer courses were taken in psychology. Beyond the introductory course required for the social work major, the most common choices in psychology are indicated next.

Number of Students Completing Selected Psychology Courses

Psychology of Adjustment	90	Educational Psychology and Measurement ⁹	26
Abnormal Psychology	90	Personality	20
Intro. to Social Psych.	73	Psychological Measurement	17
Child Development ⁷	46	Behavior Disorders in Children	10
Intro. to Statist. Methods	44	Other (29 courses)	73
Exceptional Children ⁸	32		

⁷Same as Child Development in the Department of Child Development, but classified separately for purposes of this study.

⁸Cross-listed with education but classified separately.

⁹Cross-listed with education but grouped separately.

Interestingly, in a university with an outstanding reputation in experimental psychology, few social work majors selected such courses. Only five students opted for the course, Experimental Psychology I, although six did take Experimental Social Psychology. While speculation might lead one to think that a factor separating social work students from psychology majors would be the greater interest of the latter in scientific and experimental approaches, informal observation suggests that many psychology students too are interested in the human service fields, but often with a greater propensity for research. This is an area for further exploration going beyond the scope of the present project.

EDUCATION, ANTHROPOLOGY, HOME ECONOMICS

Social Work students from the group studied had a total of 226 registrations in education courses.

Number of Students Completing Selected Courses in Education

Educ. Psychology and Measurement ¹⁰	26	Children's Literature	9
Intro.: Elementary Education	25	Methods and Materials: Art	
Intro.: Secondary-School Teaching	19	for the Classroom Teacher	8
Mental Retardation	15	Exceptional Children ¹¹	8
Principles of Guidance	11	Other (41 courses)	105

As far as students in social work and education are concerned, the desire to increase their employability and provide a sort of "insurance" in an uncertain job market not uncommonly ties together these two fields in the form of double majors.

Not only did fewer students study anthropology than sociology, psychology, or education, but fewer courses were involved.

Number of Students Completing Selected Anthropology Courses

Intro. to Study of Culture		The American Indian	3
& Society	123	Urban Anthropology	3
The World's Peoples	30	Ethnology of China	3
Culture and Personality	5	Other (17 courses)	18

The "Introduction," a course enrolling over two-thirds of all the students who took anthropology, is described as the comparative study of culture and social organization.

In view of developments in the nation and world in recent years, it is interesting and perhaps perplexing how relatively few social work students elected the course dealing with the American Indian and Urban Anthropology, as well as several courses pertaining to Africans and a course, Spanish-Speaking Peoples of the U.S. Most students' experience with anthropology was restricted to the introductory course. One might speculate that, based on their previous education, students tend to be less familiar with anthropology than many other disciplines such as sociology and psychology, and

¹⁰Cross-listed with psychology but classified separately.

¹¹Cross-listed with psychology but kept separate here.

therefore are more hesitant to venture into courses that may be perceived as more advanced or specialized than the introduction.

Finally, home economics courses in the programs of social work students were also examined in greater detail to ascertain what kinds of specific subjects were studied. As with anthropology, a single course was heavily used; over two-fifths of those taking home economics courses took Marriage and Family Interaction, which is described as contemporary American marriage and family relationships, including study of mate selection, marriage and family interaction. In some colleges and universities comparable courses exist in a sociology context. Home economics courses were selected as follows:

Number of Students Completing Selected Home Economics Courses

Marriage and Family Interaction	55	Clothing Design and Selection	7
Growth & Develop. of Young Child	16	Art in the Home	6
Introductory Food Study	11	Parent-Child Relationships	5
Principles of Nutrition	10	Other (11 courses)	21

It may be surprising that so many social work students took advantage of home economics courses. The fact that a heavy majority of these students were female is undoubtedly a factor given the traditional identification of home economics with women. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that a number of male social work students capitalized on the availability of the course in Marriage and Family Interaction. It should be noted that neither home economics nor education is an option for the fifteen or six hour concentrations, so courses chosen from these departments are electives in the pure sense of the term with the exception of students who may have double majors.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This has been an attempt to report on a study of most of the elective courses taken by students majoring in social work at one midwestern state university. The students attended school principally in the late 1960's and 1970's and all graduated either in 1971 or 1972. Since the group studied numbered 195 and was restricted to one institution, it would appear to be a relatively modest undertaking. Actually it proved to be rather complex for several reasons. Academe is a constantly changing scene, not unlike the larger world, and modifications in curriculum during the time under consideration complicate this kind of research. Transfer students were another factor to contend with in view of differences between educational institutions. Reconciling these differences proved to be difficult but not impossible. Hours of credit, which vary considerably, were not dealt with in this project which is a limitation. The decision was to tabulate courses, not hours, on the assumption that since three hours is the most frequent arrangement, differences in hours is less significant than different course titles.

The survey demonstrated that social work students expose themselves to a wide variety of courses within and in addition to requirements of the University and major department. These diverse offerings tend to fall into a fairly small number of constellations with a heavy emphasis on social and behavioral sciences. Content on human behavior, social problems and the

nature of society is conspicuous. There is reason to believe that in the absence of the required fifteen hour concentration such students would continue to accumulate substantial hours in fields such as sociology and psychology. This concentration has been referred to as elective because of the wide choice the student has on two levels, among departments and among courses within the selected unit. The study confirms that sociology is of the greatest importance to social work students as far as choice of non-social work electives is concerned and it points up that within sociology, courses selected are diverse.

No attempt has been made to define "liberal arts" and it is not being suggested that these particular graduates are necessarily liberally educated persons. It is the conviction of this writer that social work well taught both contributes to a general education and benefits from inclusion in such a learning context. That social workers need to be broadly educated there can be little doubt. It is to be hoped that with the developments around preparation for practice on the undergraduate level the general education of students will not be ignored. There is nothing in undergraduate accreditation or the idea of preparation for practice that calls for unnecessary course proliferation within the major at the expense of the student's total educational experience.

A college or university is a veritable treasure house for the fulfillment of human potential. Most people probably travel this route only once as students, even with today's emphasis on continuing education. It is essential therefore that we fully capitalize on all that an institution of higher learning has to offer, tap it wisely and exploit it thoroughly. In social work emphasis is placed on the whole person; in education we need to think of the whole person also and the total college or university of which the student and education are a part. The more we know about the elective possibilities within our respective institutions, the better. This would appear to be especially true for departments such as sociology that seem to be perceived as extremely relevant by the social work students in this study.

Finally, the need for further research is apparent. Comparative studies could be done of different schools at the same time and single schools over time when programs have changed. It would also be useful to compare educational content of social workers with that of nurses, teachers, non-specified majors and others. And more needs to be known about our graduates' views of their education. Knowledge acquired through such research would be advantageous in curriculum planning for the baccalaureate workers of the future.