Avoiding Redundancy: Advanced Placement in Social Work Education

William A. Anderson
Florida State University

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ABSTRACT

Redundancy between graduate and undergraduate social work education is a waste of both program and student time and resources. Graduate programs have several alternative methods for decreasing redundancy, and some of the advantages and disadvantages of three such methods are considered here. After briefly presenting the historical development of the advanced placement issue and identifying the primary goals of undergraduate social work education, a model is given which links the three most common forms of advanced placement. Advanced placements based upon measured student knowledge and skills (outcome method), undergraduate course offerings (content method), and graduation from an accredited undergraduate program (structural method) are contrasted in terms of their advantages and disadvantages to students, programs, and the profession. The limited empirical research on advanced placement is then summarized and several related issues are addressed.

Introduction

At the March, 1976, Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) House of Delegates meeting, a new policy statement on advanced placement at the MSW-level was adopted. The delegate body recommended that:

> Admission to the advanced portion of a graduate program should have, as a prerequisite, the mastery of the "base level" education content. Such prerequisite mastery of the "base" can be achieved either in an accredited baccalaureate social work program or on the graduate level (CSWE, 1976:3).

The rather recent development of formalized procedures for
advanced placement has a long history and is interwoven with a
number of issues both educational and political. The goal of
the present paper is to place this issue into an historical
context and to discuss: the objectives of the undergraduate
social work curriculum, a model for understanding redundancy,
some relevant research findings, and, the relationship of the
advanced placement issue to other social work education issues.

The Historical Context

During the first decade of this century, formal training in
social work at the graduate level began in the major cities of
the East (New York, Boston, Philadelphia, etc.) and a few
midwestern cities (St. Louis, Chicago). Some, like the New York
School of Philanthropy, expanded their initial one-year curric-
ulum to two years, while others remained at one year. In 1919,
17 such programs formed the "Association of Training Schools for
Professional Social Work." By 1924 this organization, under the
name "American Association of Schools of Social Work" (AASSW),
had established membership requirements for new members which
included one-year of full time study and university affiliation.
During the period 1937-1942, the AASSW instituted controversial
requirements specifying two-year graduate programs and elimin-
ating bachelor's-level programs as members. This led to the
formation of a rival organization, the National Association of
Schools of Social Administration, and thus to a period of
conflict and confusion resulting from the existence of two
"accrediting" bodies.

In 1946, under both local and federal pressure for increased
coordination, 13 organizations interested in undergraduate and
graduate social work education formed the National Council on
Social Work Education (NCSWE). In addition to its coordination
function which formed the basis for the creation of the CSWE in
1952, the NCSWE also commissioned Hollis and Taylor's (1951)
study of Social Work Education in the United States. At the
time of the merger of AASSW, NASSA, and NCSWE, the professional
degree in social work was defined as the two-year MSW -- a def-
inition which prevailed until the late 1960's. The Social Work
Curriculum Study (Boehm, 1959) emphasized the linkages in the
continuum of social work education, and stressed that under-
graduate professional education need not be in contradiction
with liberal arts education (Bisno, 1959).

In response to a variety of forces, including the avail-
ability of federal grant monies, the late 1960's and early 1970's

saw a tremendous increase in the number of BA-level programs in social welfare around the United States. The two major practice and education organizations responded to (and further increased) the new programs by formally legitimating the BA-level degree. In 1970, for both professional and financial reasons, NASW opened membership to BA-level social workers; however, this distinction was limited to graduates of those programs which CSWE began "approving" that same year. By 1974, CSWE was "accrediting" such practice-oriented programs. Having legitimated a practice-based undergraduate degree, CSWE in 1971 adopted a new accreditation standard permitting advanced standing of up to one year of the two-year MSW. A complete analysis of the controversies over the CSWE Summary Reports by Ripple (1974) and then by Dolgoff (1975) is beyond the scope of this paper. The "Task Force on Structure and Quality" final report to the CSWE Board of Directors stressed the strengthening of the BSW and the need for increased flexibility in MSW-level programming. Finally, as indicated in the Introduction above, in March of 1976, the House of Delegates defined the "base level" educational content as that required by the BSW accreditation standards and equated this base with content obtained during the first portion of the MSW. These same recommendations also criticized the use of compacts wherein advanced placement is restricted to graduates of certain BSW programs, and suggested that the advanced portion of the MSW (the "second year") should remain at least one year in length. The logic conceivably underlying these decisions will be examined further below.

Objectives of the Undergraduate Curriculum

In considering the relationship between undergraduate and graduate education in social work, a crucial concern is the purpose of such undergraduate education. In 1951, Hollis and Taylor (1951:156) defined "three separate but articulated functions for the undergraduate college": provision of a broad program useful to the common cultural heritage of all college students; provision of semiprofessional technicians; and preparation for graduate school. Laughton (1968:44) repeats these same three basic purposes more than 15 years later, although provision of manpower had become a much more accepted formal objective. Laughton further cites the myths involved in this multiplicity of objectives, e.g., that the growing number of small programs could adequately meet all of such diverse objectives or that the programs were meeting objectives since graduates did get jobs, go on to graduate school, etc.

Actions of the CSWE in the 1970's identified the primary

purpose of those undergraduate programs to be accredited as preparation for professional practice. Current accreditation standards require: 1) integration with a liberal arts base; 2) content in practice, policy and services, human behavior and social environment, and social research; and 3) at least 300 hours of field experience (CSWE, 1973). Given these current content requirements at the undergraduate level, the issue becomes one of forming a nonredundant continuum between the bachelor's and master's levels of professional social work education.

Methods for Avoiding Redundancy

As early as the <u>Curriculum Study</u>, it was clear that "there is a good deal of unprofitable duplication between the under-graduate and graduate levels of education in social work today, particularly during the first year of graduate study" (Boehm, 1959:174-175). While the detailed programmatic work of Boehm and Bisno (1959) may have had little immediate impact, Loewenberg repeated their basic message in stronger terms thirteen years later:

> But what is already clear is that graduate schools need to recognize, in very concrete ways, that some of their students have completed an undergraduate program in social work. To admit such students and treat them in the same manner as those who have majored in biology or English is neither fair nor productive (1972:18).

The latest pronouncement on the redundancy problem comes from CSWE (1976:3): "Curriculum content shall be designed to preclude redundance of course and/or field work." Although the use of advanced placement is clearly the suggested model for avoiding redundancy, other alternatives are possible, and even within the concept of advanced placement there are several viable alterna-tives. This section will consider a general model of advanced placement and some of its implications.

While other configurations are possible, the model presented in Figure 1 gives three potential methods for granting advanced placements and their interconnections at the individual program level. The strengths and weaknesses of each method will be discussed briefly, along with the underlying assumptions about student knowledge inherent in each method.

(1) Outcome Method. In this method for granting advanced placement, student knowledge and skills are measured and the

(1) Outcome Method	(2) Content Method	(3) Structural Method

Students' Knowledge & Skills	BA-level Faculty Skills	Specific Course Offerings	CSWE Content Guidelines	Accredited Undergraduate Program

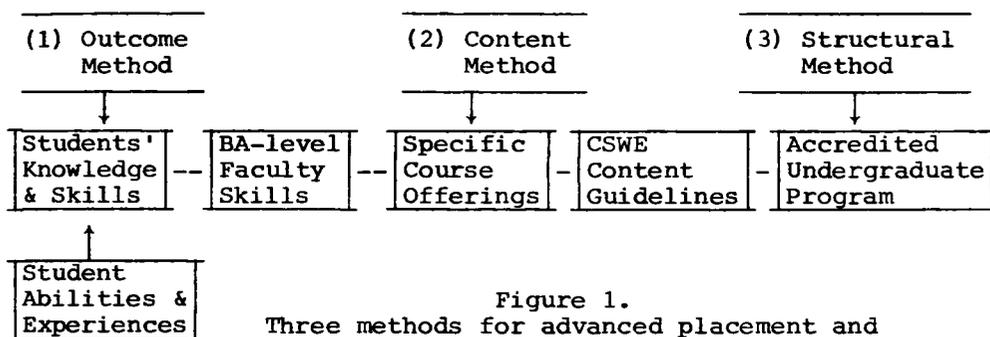| Student Abilities & Experiences |
|---|

Figure 1.
Three methods for advanced placement and
their inter-connections.

results used to determine the extent of exemption desirable for each student. If there is indeed redundancy between the first year of the typical MSW program and the content of the typical BSW program, we would expect BSW graduates who have mastered that content to exempt the first year of the MSW programs. We might also expect BA graduates of programs in related disciplines and persons with relevant work experience to be able to get exemption from portions of the first year of the MSW. Thus, the outcome method has several advantages: it bases the advanced placement on the individual applicant's merit (knowledge and skills); it controls for variations in BSW program quality, student abilities, and student learning rates; it allows for fair treatment of students with non-BSW backgrounds (the majority of applicants) who might otherwise be subject to redundancy; and, it retains control of the admissions and placement process within the individual MSW programs. The most obvious disadvantage of this seemingly optimal basis for advanced placement is the almost complete absence of adequate measurement devices for student outcomes (for some preliminary measures see, e.g., Arkava and Brennan, 1975, and Rosenblatt, et al, 1976). The range of knowledge and skills to be measured presents an awesome challenge to individual programs which is not likely to be uniformly met. In addition, the advantages cited above focus on students and MSW programs; from the profession's point of view, variation in BSW program quality might be better controlled by improving the programs rather than by developing tools for making fine discriminations among the quality of their graduates.

(2) Content Method. In this method for granting advanced placement, MSW programs either analyze applicants' transcripts to determine apparent redundancies or analyze the offerings of BSW programs to determine which ones have courses that would seem to justify granting their graduates advanced standing. These alternatives have both been used to varying extents by numerous MSW programs, e.g., programs which exempt applicants who have had a statistics course from taking the normally required MSW statistics course, or programs which set up compacts wherein graduates from certain selected BSW programs are given advanced placement (no longer an acceptable procedure--see CSWE, 1976:3). To the extent that course offerings at the BSW level have been modeled upon the first year of the MSW, we would expect advanced placement to avoid apparent redundancy for BSW graduates. For graduates of BA programs in related disciplines, it might be possible to exempt certain common courses. However, for those applicants with relevant work experience or non-traditional learning experiences, the content basis does not provide a basis for advanced standing. Thus the content method for giving advanced placement has at least two advantages: it is simpler to examine transcripts than to develop a testing program; and it provides MSW programs with a basis for examining entire BSW programs and determining the apparent extent to which their graduates should be suitable for advanced placement. The disadvantages relate to the possible disparities both between what is taught and what is learned, and between what course titles and syllabi proclaim and what is actually taught. On a more philosophical and political level, the content basis sustains the idea that MSW programs should have a great amount of control over the offerings of BSW programs, a problem which is considered further in the conclusion.

(3) Structural Method. In this method for granting advanced placement, those applicants who have graduated from CSWE accredited BSW programs and who meet the other requirements for admission (GRE, GPA, etc.) are eligible for advanced placement if the MSW program allows for such a practice. While this may be the most common model, it is of course still subject to analysis and change. The primary assumption underlying this method is that the "base" content covered in accredited BSW programs is sufficient preparation to enable BSW's to move into the advanced portion of MSW programs. Thus the emphasis is on two factors: the breadth of the professional base (including knowledge, skills and values) and the role of accreditation. As appropriate content for undergraduate programs continues to be developed and refined, and as accreditation standards become more specific and more strictly enforced, the assumed commonalities across BSW programs should become more of a reality. While this implies that the

structural method may become more effective in the future, it also has certain current advantages: it clarifies for both students and programs the basic requirement for advanced placement, and it retains primary control for the length of graduate education at the professional organization level (CSWE). The most obvious disadvantage has also been identified above: accreditation does not guarantee equivalence among accredited programs (especially among those accredited for different lengths of time) or among the graduates of such programs. This method also does not address the needs of those students with non-social work undergraduate degrees and/or relevant work experience. A less obvious problem is inherent in the political nature of both accreditation and higher education in general. Compared to the other professions, social work's accrediting body lacks the "clout" to exercise definitive control over program standards, particularly when about 60% of the BSW programs are located in state-supported schools. Political pressures toward program uniformity, economy, efficiency, and continuity within state systems threaten the authority of outside accrediting bodies.

The above material summarizes three methods for avoiding redundancy by the use of advanced placement; there are, of course, other alternatives to advanced placement for avoiding redundancy. Two possible ideas would be to: change the objectives of the BSW and/or the MSW programs, such that significant redundancy would no longer occur; or, retain the traditional time structure of the MSW degree while providing alternative and advanced study for those students capable of exempting portions of the regular program. The first of these ideas finds support in the increased call for specialization as the primary goal of MSW programs. The second alternative might find support among those calling for greater depth of study and increased content at the MSW level. Programs could also combine several of these methods to form a comprehensive (and potentially cumbersome) package. While these and other alternatives are possible, the current trend seems to favor advanced placement, for reasons apparently based upon student recruitment, economic, political, and educational concerns. The next section will examine some of the relevant research findings on advanced placement programs.

Research on Advanced Placement

The broad question of the "fit" between BSW and MSW programs does contain certain issues where empirical data could

be informative. Unfortunately, research on advanced placement
has only recently begun, and those few projects that will be
summarized here suffer from almost every imaginable threat to
validity. Perhaps the most prominent studies were carried out
beginning in the mid- and late 1960's with NIMH funding and
CSWE support at Adelphi University, San Diego State University,
and the University of Wisconsin. Rosenblatt, et al. (1976),
thoroughly document the experiment at Adelphi, giving full
information on design, instrumentation, and results. Their
findings showed that those students beginning the accelerated
MSW program started from a generally lower base of knowledge
than the students at the end of their first year of the tra-
ditional two-year program. However, the students in the
accelerated program improved more during the next year, so
that at completion of the MSW the groups were virtually iden-
tical. Finally, after a one-year follow-up, the students from
the traditional program consistently had slightly higher ratings
as practitioners. The authors stress that based upon the gen-
eral equivalence of the graduates, "Adelphi is justified in
continuing the accelerated program of social work education"
(1976:95). The studies at San Diego and Wisconsin used dif-
ferent designs and instruments (and program structures) but
generally found similar results, i.e., no major differences
between graduates of traditional and advanced placement pro-
grams, a result apparently also found at the University of
Missouri (see Schlesinger and Wolock, 1974:75).

Other studies have focused on issues other than comparing
advanced placement versus traditional program graduates.
Schlesinger and Wolock (1974) at Rutgers, conclude that an
accelerated 16-month MSW program was as effective as the tra-
ditional two-year program, although their research "design"
is so weak that conclusions are tentative at best. Walz
and Buran (1968) utilize an even weaker ex-post-facto design
in their study of differences in the graduate performance of
students with and without social work undergraduate training.
One interesting explanation they offer for their finding of
no difference in performance among the groups is the possibility
that the redundancy in the graduate program, for those students
with undergraduate social work majors, diminished motivation
and therefore lowered their performance to the same level as
the students without social work degrees. Finally, Ammons com-
pared the "readiness of undergraduate social work majors to
enter graduate schools of social work at advanced levels"
(1975:12), comparing seniors from three rather different under-
graduate programs. The primary finding was that the students

from the one school with CSWE "approved" status performed at
a significantly higher level than those from the two non-
approved schools. This finding, while apparently supportive
of an accreditation basis for advanced placement, must be
interpreted in the context of the limited instrument used,
the very small samples of students, and the arbitrary selection
of programs. It is expected that the evaluative literature
on advanced placement will continue to expand; however, it
is doubtful whether the conclusions that can be drawn will also
expand, unless more rigorous designs are applied to larger
samples across multiple programs.

Other Related Issues

While the matrix of issues relevant to the continuum of
social work education seems to expand infinitely, several more
immediate questions will be briefly considered here. As
indicated above in the discussion on methods for advanced
placement, to some extent that question can be seen as a power
struggle between CSWE and individual MSW programs. The issue
of the role of accrediting bodies in affecting program auto-
nomy was addressed by Stein in his Foreward to the Loewenberg
report on "time and quality" (1972:v). Stein particularly
emphasizes "the autonomy of each school to define its approach,
within broad limits and safeguards, to the question of advanced
standing for specified groups of students." This "schools'
rights" perspective has been repeatedly assailed by CSWE, as
schools will now be required to justify any admissions pre-
requisites which exceed the "base" content, and will be barred
from forming "compacts." It now appears that the avoidance
of redundancy and the acknowledgement of the validity of
accreditation may prevail over program autonomy.

Another issue mentioned above is the potential conflict
between the demands of CSWE and those of the legislatures and
state university systems for programs in publicly supported
schools. As one of the facets of the conflict between
professional control and state control, this issue is related
to problems such as academic freedom, tenure, public service,
values, etc. While CSWE may continue to differentiate among
the apparent quality-level of programs through selective
accreditation, state-supported graduate programs may eventually
be required to grant equal recognition to at least all in-state
undergraduate programs. While conflict is not the only con-
deivable type of relationship among government, CSWE, and
individual programs, such factors as tight budgets will

probably continue to favor that situation.

The final related issue to be mentioned is the extent
to which social work education has committed itself to the BSW
as a derivative of the traditional MSW. CSWE and most schools
have created practice-oriented bachelor's-level programs
which are modeled after the generic methods content found in
the first part of most MSW programs. Whether this type of
programming is most relevant to the needs of the society,
profession and students remains debatable. As was suggested
above, one solution to the redundancy problem might involve
sharpening the distinction between the roles of BSW's and MSW's
and then gearing their educational experiences closer to the
needs of the graduates. While preparation for direct service
has become the primary purpose of BSW programs and prepara-
tion for graduate school is now secondary, unless and until
such direct service can be defined independently of MSW-level
direct service there will continue to be redundancy between
the educational programs.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to address the redundancy problem
within the hierarchy of social work education. Some arguments
relevant to the following two sequential questions have been
identified: what are possible ways of avoiding redundancy,
and given the current emphasis on advanced placement, what
is the "best" way for administering such a process?

The underlying problem can be stated simply: within the
context of quality graduate education, redundancy is both a
waste of time and resources, and a threat to active student
involvement in the learning process. Therefore, programs
have an obligation to preclude such redundancy; while this can
be accomplished through the provision of alternate or advanced
content, such an individualized solution may be beyond the
resources of most programs. Advanced placement, defined
loosely as either the piecemeal skipping of specific redun-
dancies or the structural innovation of an accelerated "track,"
seems to provide the simplest and most politically and eco-
nomically feasible means of retaining the basic content while
avoiding redundancy. The selection of a method for providing
advanced placement involves moving from an individual merit
perspective with the difficulty of validly measuring merit,
to a compromise position relying on the validity of CSWE
accreditation standards. While the development of reliable

and valid measures of individual knowledge, skills, and values is a desirable goal, acknowledgement of and support of CSWE's BSW-program could be a factor in the continued strengthening of both the standards and their enforcement. That about one-third of the BSW programs originally "approved" were not actually accredited shows some commitment by CSWE to maintaining standards. Advanced placement based upon graudation from an accredited undergraduate social work program is the only method which emphasizes a broad cooperative perspective on social work eucation, with ultimate control retained at the professional level.

While this paper has repeatedly discussed the rights of various groups (government, CSWE, MSW and BSW programs and graduates), the charge to avoid redundancy must also be seen in the context of the rights of students whose first contact with social work education is at the MSW-level. In addition to providing a structural solution for their MSW candidates who have BSW's, programs should make an effort to avoid redundancy for that traditionally large majority of students with BA's from other disciplines.

One of the unmentioned conclusions that could be drawn from some of the studies cited above is that so little is learned at the MSW-level that it makes no difference what structure is employed. Studies show with a rather remarkable frequency the small differences when students are given before-and-after measures, possibly suggesting what might be called a "floor" effect. There is small solace in the equivalence of accelerated and traditional students, if that equivalence is based upon equal ignorance. Results such as these suggest that concerns about structure should continue to include concerns for increased quality.

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