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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

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Volume 11  
Issue 1 *March*

Article 12

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March 1984

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### Recommended Citation

Pardeck, John T. (1984) "A Comparison of Child Welfare Curriculum in Undergraduate and Graduate Programs of Social Work," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol11/iss1/12>

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A COMPARISON OF CHILD WELFARE CURRICULUM  
IN UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE  
PROGRAMS OF SOCIAL WORK\*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the differences in child welfare curriculum content of social work programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The findings report little discernible difference in curriculum content in the area of child welfare at either level. These results add to the continuing debate focusing on defining the differences between undergraduate and graduate social work education. A important question resulting from this study is -- what can the consumer of child welfare services or hiring agency expect from the social worker trained in the area of child welfare at either the undergraduate or graduate levels? The answer to this question is far from clear.

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Social work, like many other professions, is undergoing major changes. It is experiencing change in educational preparation, in personnel standards, and in a variety of other aspects related to professionalization. One of these major changes in the area of educational

preparation occurred in the last decade. In 1970, membership in the NASW (National Association of Social Workers) was opened to people with social work Baccalaureate degrees from programs approved by the CSWE. In 1974, this program approval evolved into accreditation standards similar to those used for the accreditation of graduate social work programs. As of 1983, there were over 400 undergraduate social work programs and nearly 90 Master's level programs accredited. (1) Many of the graduate programs have combined undergraduate and graduate programs of study.

Some segments of the profession believe that the inclusion of the Baccalaureate degreed workers in the NASW as regular members and the accreditation of undergraduate programs were mistaken actions. Others contend that such actions merely recognize the realities of the social service work force and help to build quality social work practice and to protect those who use social services.

A major dilemma in social work education today is defining the differences between Baccalaureate and Master's level social work education. The undergraduate program is currently being defined by many as a course of study that prepares the student for the beginning practice level so he or she can function in the generalist role (Dinerman, 1981). Educators generally view the Master's level program as being the degree emphasizing specializations in various areas of social work practice. Even though these are the commonly stated differences between undergraduate and graduate level education, there is obvious overlap between the two. This overlap has been particularly irritating to the students going through Baccalaureate programs who decide to seek advanced social

work training (Dinerman, 1981). Adding to the dilemma are the findings that report little difference in functioning and competencies between Baccalaureate and Master's level social workers (Baskind, 1981; Biggerstaff and Kolvezon, 1980; Dinerman, 1982; and Kelly, 1981). Complicating the current situation even more are writings such as Stephens' suggesting that the undergraduate trained workers are much more effective in delivering intense in-home counseling and support to multiproblem families than graduate level workers (Stephens, 1979). Thus it is implied that undergraduate training may better prepare social workers for certain areas of practice than graduate training.

Clearly, several studies suggest that the features that distinguish the undergraduate trained social worker from the graduate trained social worker are difficult to identify. It is also difficult to identify distinguishing features of course content in the programs at both levels. In this study, an attempt was made to see how directors and deans of social work programs define the differences in curriculum content in programs at both levels by focusing on issues related to child welfare content. Even though technically child welfare as a specialization of practice does not exist in undergraduate programs, many of these programs have extensive child welfare content. Child welfare as a specialization in graduate programs is very common. Consequently, much child welfare content exists in programs at both levels; however, it would seem that the content areas stressed at the undergraduate and graduate levels should differ significantly. The directors and deans of such programs would appear to be an excellent source for

defining these differences.

#### METHOD

The data analyzed in this study is from a large national survey entitled National Survey: The Place of Child Welfare in Social Work Education conducted by the National Child Welfare Training Center, University of Michigan School of Social work. The data from the national survey was collected during the Spring of 1981.

The data analyzed from the national study are from the Region VI area of the United States. Region VI consists of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Within Region VI, there are 34 accredited schools of social work. This figure is based on the 1980-81 academic year. Among these accredited schools are 9 Master's programs and 25 Baccalaureate programs. Seven of the Master's programs responded to the national study and 17 of the undergraduate programs did.

The specific questions analyzed from the national data concerning the Region VI schools dealt with questions focusing on curriculum issues related to the undergraduate and graduate programs. These questions were as follows: (1) How many courses in social work are required of all your students? (2) How would you characterize the content of the courses required in your program? (3) In the set of courses that is required of all students, how much emphasis is given in content areas related to child welfare? The content areas responded to were: a) historical perspectives on child welfare, b) services to adolescents, c) services to unmarried parents, d) in-home services, e) protective services, f) foster family card,

g) adoption, h) racial, ethnic, cultural differences, i) legal knowledge of child welfare, j) administration of child welfare services, k) program planning in child welfare, and l) community work in child welfare. Each of these content areas were rated as follows: "No emphasis" (1), "Little emphasis" (2), "Some emphasis" (3), and "Great emphasis" (4). A comparison of the responses from the directors and deans of the undergraduate and graduate programs on the content areas stressed were analyzed through the use of the Mann-Whitney U statistical test of significance. (2)

### FINDINGS

The responses to the questions concerning curriculum and child welfare content were far from expected. The question focusing on the number of courses required reported that on the average the undergraduate programs required 17 courses and the graduate programs 13 courses. Of the courses in the undergraduate programs, 78 percent of the content was generic, 14 percent was specific child welfare content, and the remaining content was indicated as "other". The content of the required courses reported in the graduate courses reported 80 percent generic and 14 percent focused on child welfare; the remaining 6 percent fell under the "other" category. This finding suggests that of the courses required in the undergraduate and graduate programs, the percentage of content related to generic and child welfare content at both levels is virtually identical. (3)

It would appear that of the required courses at both program levels, the undergraduate programs would have a much higher percentage of generic content than the graduate programs. As mentioned

previously, the undergraduate program is viewed by many as a degree that prepares the student to function as a generalist and the Master's program is seen as a program that prepares the student to specialize in an area of practice. It should be noted that the students in the graduate programs may receive some of their specialized training through elective courses. However, many graduate programs supposedly emphasized specialized content among their required courses. It may well be that the graduate programs analyzed in this study are simply an exception to this rule. Even with this possibility in mind, it was surprising to find among the undergraduate and graduate programs virtually the same percentages for generic and specialized course content in the area of child welfare.

Table I reports the findings concerning the directors' and deans' responses to the question concerning content areas. Not one of the content areas emphasized in the field of child welfare at either educational level was statistically significant. The only content area nearing statistical significance was for in-home services (4). The undergraduate programs appear to emphasize this content area more so than the graduate programs. These findings give support to the contention held by many that curriculum content stressed at the undergraduate and graduate levels, at least in the area of child welfare, differs little.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The above findings show little difference in the content areas emphasized at the undergraduate and graduate levels for preparing students for child welfare practice. It was also found that generic

content was equally common to both program levels. Such findings add to the argument suggesting that there is a great deal of overlap among the two programs, with little agreement concerning which content areas are base or specialized in the programs (Dinerman, 1981). Thus the important question still is -- what can the consumer of social services of hiring agency expect from the social worker? In light of this study's findings supporting those who argue for the position of curriculum overlap at both educational levels, the answer to this important question is far from clear.

#### NOTES

1. The following figures on the number of undergraduate and graduate programs of social work are based on information from a booklet entitled The Many Career Opportunities in Social Work by the NASW, 1983.
2. An analysis of the frequency data suggested a departure from parametric conditions required for the use of the t-test; the test of significance utilized, the Mann-Whitney U test, analyzes only the ordinal features of the data and does not specify the distribution of the research population.
3. One must keep in mind that these percentages do not capture the differences in depth of focus in the courses taught at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Even with this limitation, it is surprising how the course content at both levels was defined so evenly between generic and specific child welfare content.
4. This finding gives some indirect support to Stephens' position that



undergraduates may be more skillful at delivering in-home services. The findings show that in-home services was the only content area nearing statistical significance and was emphasized more at the undergraduate level.

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TABLE I  
 COMPARISON OF RESPONSES BY DIRECTORS AND DEANS  
 OF UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE PROGRAMS

<u>Item</u>	<u>Undergraduate</u>		<u>Graduate</u>		<u>Observed U Score</u>	
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Median</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Median</u>		
Historical Perspectives on Child Welfare	2.82	2.89	2.71	2.8	5.25	p < .66
Services to Adolescents	2.94	2.95	2.57	2.63	40.5	p < .23
Services to Unmarried Parents	2.53	2.69	2.29	2.2	44.5	p < .34
In-Home Services	2.59	2.67	1.86	2.0	35.5	p < .10
Protective Services	2.94	2.96	2.86	2.75	54.5	p < .72
Foster Family Care	2.82	2.90	2.43	2.67	48.5	p < .49
Adoption	2.65	2.85	2.43	2.67	53.5	p < .71
Racial, Ethnic, Cultural Differences	3.53	3.65	3.43	3.6	58.0	p < .95
Legal Knowledge in Child Welfare	2.59	2.57	1.86	2.0	37.0	p < .15
Administration in Child Welfare	2.18	2.19	2.0	2.0	54.0	p < .71
Program Planning in Child Welfare	2.18	2.19	2.14	2.25	56.5	p < .90
Community Work in Child Welfare	2.18	2.25	1.71	1.88	42.5	p < .26