

MEMO

TO: Francis Harrold, PhD
Dean, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

FROM: Mark O. Bigler, LCSW, PhD
Associate Professor, Chair, Department of Social Work and Gerontology

DATE: April 13, 2012

RE: CHAIR'S RESPONSE TO SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM REVIEW REPORT

On Tuesday, March 6, 2012 a four-member committee conducted a review of the Weber State University Social Work Program. Committee members had the opportunity to meet with Program faculty and staff, senior students, the Department Chair, the Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, the College librarian, and a group of community partners (see attached agenda). The review team was comprised of four individuals, each bringing unique expertise and objectivity to the process. Committee members included: Kristin Hadley, PhD, Assistant Professor, Teacher Education Department, Weber State University; Carla Koons Trentelman, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Weber State University; Brad Lundahl, PhD, Associate Professor, PhD Program Director, College of Social Work, University of Utah; and Mequette Sorensen, MSW, CSW, Assistant Professor, Director of Social Work, Salt Lake Community College. This memo provides an official response to the committee's findings and recommendations.

Standard A: Mission Statement

The review committee noted that the Program's mission is well-articulated and clearly aligned with the mission of the profession, but lacks clear evidence that educational outcome objectives are monitored and measured. The report suggested that this is likely a weakness in the self-study, as opposed to the Program itself, and could be rectified by "inserting language that indicates where and how the objectives are evaluated."

The Social Work Program faculty agrees with the review committee's assessment on Standard A and acknowledges that Program evaluation is an ongoing challenge. Whether this is a simple matter of clarity within the self-study or a more pervasive issue related to assessment, the Program's faculty is keenly aware of the need to connect the mission to core competency outcomes.

The larger issue of Program evaluation will be given significant attention by the faculty during the next academic year, both in response to this review team's recommendations and in anticipation of the Program's next reaffirmation review by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in June 2017. As required by CSWE, the process of Program evaluation is shifting from an emphasis on educational outcome objectives to a focus on a set of core

competencies. Social Work faculty members will meet this summer to discuss this topic and map out specific steps to be taken over the next two to three years to bring the Program's outcomes and evaluation process in line with University and CSWE expectations. Dr. Kennedy will take the lead in this process, working closely with the Department Chair, the Field Placement (Internship) Director, and other full-time and adjunct faculty members.

Standard B: Curriculum

The review team's report praised the Program's curriculum, noting that: it clearly reflects fundamental social work values; it prepares students to function in community roles both in the course of their studies and after graduation; required courses are readily available to students; and the senior capstone project is a highly valued learning and evaluation tool. A major concern highlighted by the reviewers was "the lack of resources allocated to support the ongoing educational programming." As a result, the committee indicated that Social Work Program faculty members are overworked, which has a direct impact on their "capacity for creative innovation." Reviewers were concerned that this instructional and administrative burden, if not addressed, could potentially dampen creativity and innovation related to Program and curriculum development.

Social Work faculty members are proud of their curriculum and were pleased to hear the reviewers' praise of the Program. They are also acutely aware of the review team's concern regarding a palpable lack of resources to support educational programming, particularly in the form of long-vacant faculty positions. The Department is currently operating at 50% of its faculty capacity and there is little likelihood that this will improve in the foreseeable future. Two vacant full-time faculty positions in Social Work leave a significant gap in the Program's core curriculum. Adjunct support has helped meet some of the instructional needs, but major committee assignments in the Department, the College, and at the University level – in addition to a regular 4/4 teaching load – weigh heavily on the backs of three full-time tenured faculty members. Furthermore, while the other two open positions in the Department are not explicitly part of the Social Work Program, these vacancies have a significant impact on the Program and its faculty nevertheless. Social Work majors take a number of required courses (e.g., GERT/SW 3500 - Social Welfare Policy, GERT/SW 3600 - Social Statistics) that were taught in the past exclusively by Gerontology faculty. In addition, for many years, one to two sections of the Social Work Program's introductory course (SW 1010) were taught by a member of the Gerontology Faculty each year. Adding to this curricular strain, many Social Work majors minor in Gerontology and a growing number take Gerontology courses (many cross-listed with Social Work) to meet requirements for the Program's alternative to a tradition minor.

Recognizing that economic realities play a central role in this matter, and that tangible changes are unlikely in the coming academic year, Social Work faculty members will continue to cover gaps in the curriculum as needed. The Program will also work to expand and strengthen its pool of adjunct instructors and will make a concerted effort to make better use of this resource. The faculty will continue to raise this concern for the Program, where appropriate, and will press the University's administration to fill the Department's open faculty positions sooner rather than later.

Standard C: Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment

The review team found that student learning outcomes are clear and reported that anecdotal feedback during the site visit from students, faculty, and field placement representatives suggests that the Program is high quality. Evaluation of learning objectives in relation to the field (internship) experience is particularly well defined and field supervisors indicate that requirements for students are specific and clear. The report notes, however, that the Program's self-study does not do this feedback justice and that the evaluation measures in general do not give a clear picture of student learning. As an outgrowth, the reviewers expressed concern that the Program may not be getting recognized for the good work being done. It was suggested that increased resources from the College are needed to help the faculty create and implement a more effective Program evaluation process.

As noted in reference to Standard A above, the Social Work faculty recognizes the ongoing challenge of Program evaluation. As faculty members work to incorporate core competencies into the Program's assessment of student learning, it is expected that the link between mission and outcomes, and the specific evidence of learning and professional development will become clearer and, thus, more useful to ongoing program development. The Program welcomes and fully supports the review team's recommendation that increased resources are needed for this process to be effective in both the short and long term.

This issue will be given a great deal of attention by the faculty during the next several academic years. The Social Work faculty will meet this summer to put in motion a revamping of the Program's outcomes and evaluation process in line with University and CSWE expectations. Dr. Kennedy will take the lead in this process, working closely with the Department Chair, the Field Placement (Internship) Director, and other full-time and adjunct faculty members.

Standard D: Academic Advising

The Social Work Program was praised for the effectiveness of its academic advising, both prior to and following formal admission. All faculty members in the Program participate in academic advising, providing students with guidance through the required curriculum and serving as professional mentors. The primary concern noted by the review committee regarding academic advising was the additional workload and strain this active role places on members of the faculty.

There is consensus among the Social Work faculty that the current academic advisement process is a key part of the Program's success. Students consistently identify faculty accessibility and mentorship as a unique and valuable part of their professional development. Assigning this task to one person, as other programs do, particularly an individual outside of the Department, could potentially distance students from faculty and, therefore, would seem to be counterproductive.

Having vacant faculty positions filled would, among other things, spread this responsibility and thereby lighten the load on individual faculty members. In this way, the burden would be lessened and the Program could maintain its advising and mentoring tradition. In the meantime, the faculty will discuss in future Department meetings ways to strengthen and streamline academic advising. Strengthening orientation efforts for Social Work majors who are working toward formal admission and engaging students in academic advising early in their studies is one

suggested strategy for making this process more effective and efficient.

Standard E: Faculty

Reviewers were especially enthusiastic in their assessment of the Program's staff, noting faculty members' dedication, commitment, and collaborative spirit, both amongst themselves and with students. As noted above, an environment of mentorship was evident in feedback from students, support staff, the dean, and the Program's community partners. The faculty willingly works with students on research, service projects supporting the community, and in leadership development related to the Program's students organization. However, as noted by the committee, this level of involvement with students adds to an already heavy workload, potentially limiting time and/or energy for creativity and innovation. In addition, reviewers raised concerns regarding the amount of overload teaching as it relates to long-term sustainability and reiterated their recommendation that the College fill the vacant tenure-track position in Social Work. The Department was also urged to meet more regularly to discuss and develop strategies to meet the needs of the Program.

Members of the Social Work faculty are strongly committed to the professional development of the Program's students, but are also cognizant of the demands of their efforts to engage students in collaborative service, scholarly activities, and leadership development. Striking a balance between these "extracurricular" student-oriented activities, contract teaching requirements, and covering classes that do not have a regularly assigned instructor due to faculty vacancies is a significant challenge.

The dedication of the Program's faculty to its students is unlikely to change. Having an additional full-time, tenure-track faculty member would do much to lighten the load, at the same time allowing for the level of student-faculty interaction that has long been a hallmark of the Social Work Program. The faculty will continue to assess the distribution of overload courses and put concerted effort into making better use of its highly qualified pool of adjunct instructors. In addition, Social Work faculty members will press the College to fill the Department's open tenure-track faculty positions, with greatest priority on the vacancy in the Program's faculty.

Standard F: Program Support

The Program review team concluded that the secretary and librarian provide excellent services and support. A concern was noted, however, about a portion of the secretary's workload being assigned to tasks outside of the Department.

The Program faculty concurs with this assessment. Short of shouldering additional responsibilities that would ordinarily be assigned to the Department secretary, there does not appear to be any direct action faculty members can take to address the reviewers' concern regarding her reassigned work time.

Standard G: Relationships with External Communities

The Social Work Program has a good track record of strong relationships with valued community partners, which seemed very clear to the review team. These relationships between expert field supervisors and well-prepared interns benefit students, the Social work Program, the University as a whole, and the partnering agencies. The reviewers suggested that more opportunity for collaboration between agencies and a clearer, more consistent system of continuing instruction for field supervisors could further strengthen the Program's relationships with external communities.

A significant part of the Program's success lies in its ability to identify key community partners and foster strong collaborative working relationships that meet both academic needs of students and service needs of local social welfare agencies. The review team's recommendation for more interagency collaboration and a Program-sponsored process of providing continuing education to its community partners is well-taken.

The review team's suggestions will be the subject of discussion in future Department meetings, beginning with a summer retreat. In addition, the Field Director and Department Chair will work together to develop opportunities for collaboration between agencies. One tangible example that is already underway is the creation of a set of professional development courses designed to support service providers who wish to secure a Social Service Workers (SSW) license. Over the past year, the Field Director and the Department Chair have been working with representatives from local social service agencies and the WSU Continuing Education Department to provide this set of courses on-site. A pilot of this project is set for later this summer. The Field Director will also be charged with the task of establishing a more systematic continuing education process for current and future field supervisors. Such a program has existed in the past and simply needs to be updated and reinstated. The Program has set a target date of Spring 2013 to reintroduced this training.

Standard H: Program Summary

Throughout its report, the review team noted several important strengths of the Weber State University Social Work Program. The Program's mission is clear and consistent with that of the University and the Profession of Social Work. The curriculum is strong, integrated, and well-suited for the professional preparation of social workers at the undergraduate level. Student learning outcomes are clear. Academic advising is effective in guiding students through their major requirements and serves an important function of professional mentoring. The faculty is highly professional, dedicated, and student-focused. The Program has good staff and library support. Relationships between the Program and its community partners are strong and productive.

Concerns raised by the review team center around two primary issues: the need for a clearer, more sophisticated program evaluation process and over-extension of Program faculty due to long-vacant faculty positions in the Department. As the Program shifts in coming months from the assessment of educational objectives to core competencies, the former issue should be adequately addressed. The latter depends, to a large extent, on better use of available resources, the emergence of funds to fill faculty vacancies, and institutional priorities that place the Program's needs high on the list. The Program's faculty will continue to work with what it has

to maintain its tradition of high quality professional preparation in Social Work. At the same time, Social Work faculty members will continue to press the dean and University administration to recognize the Department's staffing needs and act, within its means and ability, to fill its open faculty positions.