

Final Report -
Bi-annual Survey of Social Work Graduates
2000-2002 Cohorts

Submitted to the Department of Social Work
University of Michigan-Flint
August 2005

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Every two years the Department of Social Work at the University of Michigan-Flint conducts a mailed survey of students who had graduated approximately 2 years before. This biannual survey is conducted to achieve three outcomes. First, the bi-annual survey is designed to assist the faculty in evaluating the impact of specific aspects of the curriculum on employment and graduate school experiences of graduates. Second, participation in all aspects of the research project is offered as an enrichment experience for current students interested in furthering their research experience. Third, the project is completed in accordance program evaluation plans established with the national organization Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and University of Michigan-Flint Academic Assessment Committee (AAC, 2005).

This project began in June 2003, when students who had completed the SWK 250: Research Methods and Evaluation course were invited to join a research project to survey graduates about their experiences since graduation. Two students agreed to support the data collection aspect of the survey process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first step of the project was to outline the direction of the current survey. Students began with a review of the literature on graduate surveys. Literature from social work journals was sought using Social Work Research and Abstracts on-line, and from general literature using First-Search on-line. Although articles generally related to this topic were identified, no specific citations were used to develop the instrument.

In the Winter of 2003, the social work faculty participated in a curriculum development retreat resulting in the expansion of the Student Outcome Assessment Plan (2002) reflecting four program goals, each with a subset of objectives and subsequent sub-divided multiple benchmarks. This graduate survey remained as an explicit instrument, and questions within the survey were used to assess each of the four goals. A detailed account of the plan is available through the University Website for Assessment.

The last phase of the literature review process included a focus group discussion with the faculty regarding the choice of open-ended questions. Using the results of the feed back loop from the previous years' SOA, the faculty chose 4 topics for particular attention: Culturally Competent Practice, use of theory in practice decisions, use of research in practice, and the real life experiences of inter-professional practice.

METHODOLOGY

Design

Ex-post facto research design was chosen for the project. The past event was identified as graduation from the social work program at University of Michigan – Flint in the 2000-2002 cohorts. The present events were identified as: employment experiences, graduate school experiences, and reflective perception of the social work curriculum.

Two forms of data collection were chosen to implement this design. Case record review was implemented to measure the past event. Student academic records were accessed to identify key demographic variables and academic achievement standards, and graduate status. The current events were measured using standardized mail survey techniques (Dillman, 1978)

Population

The team decided to survey the entire cohort of students rather than sample a smaller subset. Factors considered in this decision included the relatively small population, the strength

of the research team, the political and economic benefits of including all students and the limits of statistical inferences to describe the real picture of graduates. The list of all Social Work graduates during this time period was obtained from the Office of the Registrar that identified the population as 106 students. A list of current addresses for these students was obtained from the Office of Alumni Relations which is updated monthly and includes change of address information provided by the Postal Service.

The population can be described based on demographic data collected using the case record review technique. The population of graduates in the 2000-2002 cohort can be characterized as predominantly women (87% n=88). The racial composition of the cohorts was predominantly white (64% n=65), with a substantial representation of African American graduates (19%, n=20%).

Instrumentation-

The instrument was developed combining questions from the previous study and adding content emphasized in the literature review. The focus group technique was used to synthesize the results of the constituent interviews with the content from the other literature sources. From this focused discussion, three major foci of the survey emerged: employment experiences, graduate school experiences, and curriculum effectiveness. The literature review from the Student Outcome Assessment (2002) and Curriculum Policy Statement (1992) provided evidence to further emphasize generalist practice subdivide the instrument into the specific areas of field placement, liberal arts, CSWE accreditation, practice skills, critical thinking skills, diversity and values and ethics. In addition to the standard questions, new qualitative questions were generated to explore four emerging trends in the practice community: use of research in practice, use of theory in practice, working with professionals from other disciplines (i.e., inter-professional practice), and working with clients from diverse cultures (i.e., culturally competent practice).

Member checking was conducted by presenting the final instrument to each of the interviewed constituents for review of their areas of concern.

The final instrument contained 35 questions that were a combination of open ended, Likert Type attitude rating scales, nominal (yes/no) and ordinal ranking questions. The final instrument was approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee of the University of Michigan-Flint on July 16, 2004.

Procedures

The initial mailing was made on July 22, 2004. Each envelope included the survey instrument, a personalized cover letter, a stamped self-addressed return envelope. A post-card reminder was mailed August 9, 2004 to those who had not returned their survey. A second mailing, including an updated letter, return envelope and instrument was sent to all those graduates who had not returned the survey by August 31, 2004. At the final analysis stage, the 10 students were identified as unreachable and 65 students completed the written survey. In conclusion, a 68% response rate was recorded (65/96).

Due to limited resources during the winter of 2003, measures of non-response error was limited to demographic comparisons of respondents and non-respondents. Demographic variables of race, age, working status and dependents were similar patterns between the non-respondents and the population. The respondents were predominantly female (93% n=61) which closely corresponded to female representation in the population of 88%. The voice of men was

also included with 5% of the sample comprised of male respondents. Similarly, respondents were predominantly white (75%, n= 49), closely replicating the racial composition of the population of 65% white. The representation of African Americans was equitable in response rate with 14% of respondents compared to 19% in the population. Based on the similarities between the sample and the population, it was concluded that the respondents represented the cohort on the vital demographic statistics. Therefore, non-response error was eliminated as a threat to validity and follow up calls to non-respondents was not made.

DATA ANALYSIS

Employment Experiences

The Social Work curriculum at the University of Michigan – Flint is a professional education program. Therefore, one of the goals students seek as an explicit intention to their studies is to eventually practice at the bachelor level employment as a generalist practitioner. One measure of the effectiveness of the curriculum to achieve this goal is based on the experiences of graduates as bachelor level employees within the social welfare system. This research project sought information about the graduates' employment experiences: Employability and Satisfaction.

Employability

Employability refers to the opportunities available to graduates' as a result of the degree status. Employability was measured as a series of variables: Employment status, Field of practice, Agency funding, Employment Stability, Salary, and Benefits.

Employment Status

A critical measure of employability is the determination if graduates are employed and the explanation of why graduates were not employed. Graduates were asked about their current employment status. The mode was "yes" (86% n=58) indicating that students are employed two years after graduation.

Field of Practice

Field of practice refers to the work assignment as measured by the employment setting, type of clients served, and/or social issue addresses. The goal of the undergraduate curriculum is to prepare graduates for employment in a variety of fields of practice based on the individual interests and aptitudes of the graduate. Fields of practice was measured as a categorical variable in which graduates marked the one field of practice best representing their employment focus. Of those students who indicated they were currently employed, the modal response was "yes, a social work position" (83.1%, n=49) indicating that the majority are working in social work fields of practice. Graduates also indicated employment in a wide range of fields of practice (Table 1).

Table 1: Employment by Field of Practice

<u>Percentage Employed</u>	<u>Field of Practice</u>
8 %	Gerontology
2 %	Housing
32 %	Child Welfare
6 %	Health
18 %	Mental Health
2 %	Developmental Disabilities
2 %	Criminal Justice/Juvenile Justice
0 %	Work Place/Employment
4 %	Substance Abuse
4 %	Hospice
6 %	School
16 %	Other

Agency Funding

Funding source of the agency was used to classify the organization into one of three social welfare sectors: government, corporate, and voluntary. The most frequently identified funding source for employing agencies was the government (Federal n=7, State n=10, Government n=5), followed by government -agency outsourcing (FIA/DCH/CMH n=8). Insurance/Third Party pay was exclusively mentioned as Medicaid/Medicare (n=7).

An interesting dynamic in the pattern of funding described by this cohort was the significant decline in reliance on the private sector with charitable contributions (n=4), and private pay (n=3) mentioned a significantly fewer times than the government related funding.

Similarly, another noticeable connection to the current economic situation was evidenced in the graduates' reports of the agency's dependency on multiple funding sources. 17 respondents indicated that there were 2 or more funding sources.

Employment Stability

Employment stability refers to the opportunities for full time employment and graduates' experiences of sustained employment. The nature of graduates' employment experiences is also quite varied. The majority of graduates who are employed report working hourly positions (67%, n=34) while the remaining 38% (n=21) report working salaried positions. The majority of working graduates report working full time (mean number of hours worked = 39.6, s.d.= 7.64; mode = 40 hours, range = 56) although there is great variability in their part time and full time opportunities.

Students appear to be successful in maintaining their employment status over time. When asked "*How many months have you been employed since graduation?*" students reported being employed a range of 1 month to 54 months since graduation. In the distribution of reported months, two peak points of the frequency occurred at responses of 24 months (7.5%), 36 months (13%) and "continuous employment." Interpreting this pattern, the majority of graduates are employed immediately upon graduation either after the BSW or after the MSW

programs. This conclusion is supported by two demographic patterns: Student delay entry into the workforce by enrolling in graduate school immediately following the BSW program. Second, given that the population included student reporting as cohorts two and three years since graduation years, corresponds directly to the fact that they report being employed 24 and 36 months (i.e., continuously employed.)

Salary

A fundamental goal of students was to seek employment after graduation such that the salary would compensate for the economic sacrifice of college tuition and professional nature of their preparation.

In order to determine a legitimate estimation of the earning potential, graduates were asked to mark their salary within a range of \$4000.00 as an ordinal level of measurement. Graduates reported a bi-modal salary of “\$19,001-23,000” and “\$31, 001 -35,000” with a median salary reported in the category of “\$27,001-31,000”. Table 2 outlines the dramatic variability that exists between graduates in salary earned (range from less than \$15,000 to \$50,000).

Table 2: Annual Income as Full Time Equivalent

<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Annual Salary</u>
6.5%	less than 15,000
3.2%	15,000 - 19,000
19.4%	19,001 - 23,000
12.9%	23,001 - 27,000
19.4%	27,001 - 31,000
22.6%	31,001 - 35,000
6.5%	35,001- 39,000
6.5%	39, 001- 43,000
0.0%	43,001 - 47,000
3.2%	47,001 - 50,000
0.0%	50,001 +

Benefits

Benefit packages that accompany salary, have become an integral aspect to quality of life measures within professional employment standards. Benefits were measured as a quantitative item designed as list of typical benefits offered and the response option as a dichotomous variable (yes no). Graduates indicated all the benefits they received. Table 3 indicates the percent of graduates who indicated they received each particular benefit. The five most frequently mentioned benefits were: vacation time (87%), full time work (83.3%), Health Care, Dental/ Eye care (83.3%) and Sick Leave (75.9%) In-service training (74.1%). Each graduate also indicated the number of benefits available. On average, graduates indicated that they were offered 7 categories of benefits available (median = 7, variance = 7.14 and mode = 9 with a range =10, n=54).

Table 3: Available Benefits

<u>Percent Graduates</u>	<u>Benefit</u>
83.3%	Full time work
55.6%	Flex Time
87.0%	Vacation Time
75.9%	Sick Leave
83.3%	Health Care/Dental Care / Eye Care
9.3%	Child/Dependent Care Subsidy or Services
70.4%	Retirement Benefits
31.5%	School Tuition
74.1%	In-service/Training
5.6%	Professional Membership
53.7%	Advancement Opportunities
9.3%	Other, (none)

Interpretation of Employment Status

Four aspects of the questions associated with employment status of graduates indicate favorable responses to the Social Work program goals:

- The vast majority of graduates are employed, and the employment positions are within professional social work.
- The University of Michigan-Flint curriculum goal of generalist practice appears to be successful in the evidence of the variety of fields of practice where graduates report being employed.
- Although the majority of graduates report being employed as hourly workers, the majority report working full time employment.
- Salaries, benefits, and longevity of employment suggests that graduates afford more than a minimum quality of life.

Two aspects of the questions associated with employment experiences of graduates indicate areas of consideration to assure the Social Work program goals are met:

- The great variability of compensation (salary and benefits) provides evidence that some graduates do not experience appropriate employment opportunities. Low wages, few benefits, and part time employment characterize some graduates’ post degree employment experiences.
- The employing agencies dependence on government support, apparent dwindling of charitable contributions, and multiple funding sources suggests instability in the viability of the social work service agencies. Curriculum content preparing students to respond to changes in the funding source of employment agencies, particularly responding to multiple funding sources should be assured.

Employment Satisfaction

Employment satisfaction refers to the graduates' perceptions of the value of their employment opportunities. Employment satisfaction was measured as a series of variables in the survey categorized by two organizing constructs: the transition to employment, employment decision making. Perceptions of the curriculum related to employment is also discussed.

Transition to Employment

Since the survey was measuring the employment status of graduates up to two years since graduation there was a distinct possibility that current results were radically different than the recent past. Similarly, concerns existed about the possibilities that serious delays in finding employment would represent problems with the curriculum. In an effort to evaluate these potential issues, graduates were asked a series of open-ended questions regarding their transition to employment including the length of time, decision-making strategies, and recommendations for new graduates about job searching.

Students reported being employed quickly once they start seeking employment. When asked "*Once you started looking for employment, how long did it take you to become employed?*" 49% of students (n=26) reported being continuously employed following graduation or following attendance in graduate school.

Employment Decision Making

Preparation as a generalist practitioner provides a wide array of possible employment settings, and allows the graduate to be selective about the setting they pursue. In an effort to determine how graduates manage all the possibilities, both quantitative and qualitative questions were included in the survey.

Decision making was measured quantitatively as a list of typical factors impacting employment decisions. Graduates were offered response options as a dichotomous variable (yes no) in which graduates indicated all the factors they considered. Graduates reported a complex priority setting strategy unique to their circumstances. When asked "*Which of the following factors did you consider when exploring employment options since graduation?*" the top five criteria for choosing an employment setting were: Benefits (77.4%) and Hours of employment (77.4%), salary (75.5%), location close to home (67.9%) and Job Responsibilities related to social work(64.2%) (Table 4).

Table 4: Factors Influencing Employment Decisions

<u>Percent Graduates</u>	<u>Factor</u>
67.9%	Location close to home
77.4%	Hours of employment
45.3%	Flexibility with family obligations
75.5%	Salary
77.4%	Benefits
41.5%	Agency reputation in the community
34.0%	Perception of agency values
56.6%	Field of practice related to personal interest
64.2%	Job responsibilities related to social work
22.6%	Profession of supervisor
43.4%	Opportunity for advancement
17.0%	Perceived stress of the job
13.2%	Other

These decision making factors were reiterated as the emergent themes from the graduates' responses to a qualitatively based open-ended question "Please list the three most important factors in your final decision for accepting a job." Five emergent themes developed in response to this question.

The first emergent theme was labeled "compensation." Compensation was further clarified by "salary" which was mentioned by 29 graduates and identified first by 11 graduates and "benefits" which was mentioned by 21 graduates and identified first by 5 graduates. This pattern directly relates to the quantitative data in Table 4 that indicates that "salary" was a deciding factor for 75.5% of respondents and benefits was a deciding factor for 77.4% of graduates.

Second, "field of practice" including references to the type of clients served and/or the type of social issue addressed was mentioned by 28 graduates and identified first by 13 graduates. This pattern corresponded to the quantitative report from Table 4 in which field of practice was a deciding factor for 56.6% of respondents.

The third emergent theme was labeled "organizational characteristics." Organizational characteristics were identified by 41 graduates and identified first by 15 graduates. Organizational characteristics were those elements of the job that were controlled by the employing agency and included specific mention of location (n=13), advancement opportunities (n=6), agency reputation (n=9), positive work environment (n=14), and job security (n=5)

Fourth, "Position Description" elements were identified by 29 graduates and identified first by 9 graduates. "Position Description" incorporated comments regarding hours of employment and job flexibility, job title and duties assigned. This qualitative data reiterates the quantitative ratings included in Table 4 of hours of employment, flexibility as employment considerations. The qualitative data further differentiated job responsibilities to include specific elements of tasks, roles and opportunities.

Preparation for Employment Skills

The social work curriculum is guided by the intention to prepare generalist practitioners (Curriculum Policy Statement, 1992). Little information has been documented however, about how this curriculum is translated by employing agencies as specific and necessary skills for completing the job and the relative emphasis of specific responsibilities. Although each field of practice is unique and each employment setting has context specific expectations, there is the assumption within generalist practice that there are universal tasks and skills that all students should learn in order to be successfully employed.

In an attempt to identify which tasks and skills students would find useful, the graduates were asked to rate how frequently they used each of the key tasks and skills identified as generalist practice elements (Table 5). Nine elements were identified as universal employment responsibilities, each having a mode of 1 and a high number of respondents reporting daily use of the generalist practice concepts. These elements included: Planned Change Process, initial plans of intervention, measurable outcomes, case-notes, record keeping, agency reports, client progress reports, independent work, working with a partner, and working with a team.

The high variability (range = 4) of all the generalist practice elements was an important indicator of the relative significance of the other elements of generalist practice. Although they are not universal elements of the daily work of the majority of graduates, some graduates reported completing these tasks frequently.

Table 5: Use of Generalist Practice Skills in Employment Settings

<u>Item</u>	<u># reporting Daily Use</u>	<u># reporting Never Used</u>	<u>Mode (range)</u>
DSM IV	13	15	4(4)
Planned Change Process	18	13	1(4)
Report Writing			
Initial plans of intervention	31	4	1(4)
Measurable outcomes	22	4	1,3(4)
Evaluate your own practice	9	8	4(4)
Case notes - record keeping	49	3	1(4)
Agency reports	19	13	1(4)
Conference-journal articles	3	25	5(4)
Client progress reports	35	4	1(4)
Presentations			
Presenting at conferences	3	27	5(4)
Presenting to the public	5	24	5(4)
Presenting to agency officials	4	23	5(4)
Presenting to agency staff	10	14	4(4)
Presenting to client groups	12	16	5(4)
Work Settings			
Independent work, or working alone	50	2	1(4)
Working with a partner	24	3	1(4)
Working with a team	25	2	1(4)
Working on a committee	5	15	3(4)

Key: Mode of 1=Daily, 2=Weekly, 3=Monthly, 4=Infrequently, 5=Never

Perception of the Curriculum in preparation for Employment

In an effort to identify the graduates’ perception of their preparation for employment, graduates were asked “*Please rate your perceptions of how well the social work curriculum at University of Michigan-Flint prepared you for employment.*” Graduates indicated that the University of Michigan-Flint social work curriculum was quite adequate in preparing them for employment. Graduates indicated that their perception “strongly agreed” (mode= 1) or “agreed” (mode =2) with each of specific aspects of the curriculum identified as preparation for employment (Table 6).

There were also curricular areas that could be improved to strengthen employability of graduates. High variability (range=4) indicated some discrepancy in the rating of a curriculum objective. Items of particular concern indicated some “disagreement” (number of 4 & 5) with their preparation for the outcome objective. Although variability was an important quality indicator, a very small number of graduates indicated “disagreement.” Based on the number of graduates who reported “disagreement” (scores 4 or 5), Table 6 provides evidence for attention to preparation for: “Group Projects prepared me to work as a team member in interventions.”

Table 6: Perception of Preparation for Employment

<u>Item</u>	<u>Mode</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>Number 4 or 5 scores</u>
My supervisor perceives me as well prepared.	1	2	0
My employer perceives UMF as a good program.	1	4	2
My education prepared me well for the transition to employment.	1	3	2
I received adequate instruction on the appropriate roles of a social worker.	1	4	2
I obtained useful skills for employment.	1	4	1
My education allowed me to gain the knowledge I need for employment.	1	4	1
I received guidance to adjust my attitude about people.	1	4	3
I receive support to develop a professional attitude about social work.	1	4	2
I was adequately prepared to work with people in other professions.	1	4	2
Group projects prepared me to work as a team member in interventions.	1	4	5

Key: 1=Strongly agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree

Diversity in Employment Settings

Representing our commitment to preparing students to work with a diverse client population, we asked students: “*Please describe how often you have been able to apply concepts taught at UMF about diversity and multi-culturalism in your employment experiences.*” The overwhelming response to this question indicated the diversity content was critical. Of the 44 respondents who answered this question, 38 specifically stated “daily.” Three of the remaining qualified the time frame with statements such as “on a regular basis.” One student underlined the importance of diversity curriculum with the statement “One of the reasons I left * (agency) after one year was because of the lack of diversity and multi-culturalism.” Two indicated that diversity was less important than the curriculum emphasized with replies such as “Not as often as I was taught.”

Employment Content Not in the Curriculum

In an effort to identify aspects of the employment expectations the faculty had not yet recognized, an open ended question was posed to the respondents: *“Please describe here, any aspects of your job that you were not adequately prepared to handle and that we could improve in the Social Work Program at the University of Michigan-Flint”*. Responses to this question can be organized into three themes. The theme of “knowledge base” included references to “list of local agencies” (n=1), DSM IV (n=2), Civil Rights and Agency Policy (n=1), prevention (n=1). The theme of affective preparation included “coping with agency politics, (n=3)” and “handling stress” (n=3). The theme of skills needed included: role playing in counseling (n=6), counseling in group work (n=4), writing plans of care (n=1), writing documentation (n=1), teamwork/working with other professionals (n=4) and providing supervision (n=1).

Interpretation:

Interpretation of graduates’ responses to employment satisfaction indicated that graduates are typically satisfied with the employment experiences they have. The University of Michigan-Flint curriculum goal of generalist practice appears to be successful as evidenced in the variables of employment satisfaction.

- Graduates reported that they have a relatively short and easy transition from school to employment.
- Graduates reported that they are able to find employment that matches the factors they identified as important to their decision-making.
- Graduates reported great variability in the use of the skills taught them, which is consistent with expectations for generalist practice.
- Graduates reported frequent use of diversity concepts in their professional practice.
- Graduates reported positive regard for the diversity content taught at UMF.
- Graduates reported that they were well received within the employment arena.
- Graduates reported satisfaction with their undergraduate degree preparation for employment.

One area of concern emerged. A significant discrepancy was reported between the variables measuring recruitment and retention of a job and subsequent employment satisfaction. The decision- making factors for choosing an employment agency appear to be necessary but insufficient considerations for the graduates’ employment satisfaction.

- Curriculum content needs to include skills that address the issues that sustained social work practice in order to socialize graduates to a long-term commitment.
- One opportunity to increase satisfaction with their employment experiences is to prepare graduates to work in groups as a team.
- Curriculum Content can be enriched with additional instruction in counseling.

Graduate School Experiences

Knowledge building for social work practice is a continuous process. Professionals within social work must stay connected to the emerging research on appropriate theory and

practice. Since the Social Work curriculum at the University of Michigan – Flint is a professional education program, it is imperative that students be prepared to continue their education beyond the bachelors degree. The effectiveness of the curriculum to achieve this goal was measured by graduates’ experiences in continuing education opportunities and master degree studies.

Continuing Education Experiences

The profession of social work maintains a value orientation toward continuing education. Graduates’ participation in continuing education was measured in two areas: Continuing education and graduate school attendance.

Continuing Education Options

Results of the survey indicated that graduates participated in a wide variety of continuing education activities beyond the bachelors degree. Table 7 details the range and depth of activities graduates used to further their education. At least two thirds of the graduates reported using two strategies for continuing their education including: Agency In-service training (80.0%), Professional workshops/conferences (74.5%), and at least half of all graduates reported using: Interview/consult other professionals (63.6%) Use of Library/computer (60.0%) and Reading professional journals (54.5%).

In addition to the particular categories of activities, the number of continuing education activities reported by each graduate was measured. More than half of the respondents reported participating in five or more different continuing education activities (56.4%). Six continuing education activities was the most frequently reported number of continuing education activities (mode= 6, range = 9). Only two graduates reported that they did not participate in any continuing education activity.

Table 7: Continuing Education Activities

<u>Percent Graduates Participating</u>	<u>Activity</u>
80.0 %	Agency training or in-service
43.6%	Membership in NASW
27.3%	Other professional organization membership
74.5%	Professional workshops/conferences
54.5%	Read professional journals
32.7%	Established a mentor/mentee relationship
60.0%	Use of library/computer
63.6%	Interview/consult other professionals
30.9%	Attend college courses
12.7%	Other (Licensure)

Graduate School Status

Graduates were asked about their plans for and experiences with continuing their education in graduate school. Results indicated that within 2 years of graduating with a bachelor’s degree,

more than half of the graduates had initiated (26%, n=18), or finished their masters degree (28% n=19). An additional 33% (n=22) of the graduates were considering graduate school two years after graduation but had not yet chosen a program.

Although a few graduates (n=3) chose to study different content at the masters level (Law, Counseling and Pastoral Counseling), the majority of graduates choosing graduate school continued to study within social work (89%, n=34). All of the students who initiated graduate programs chose to attend one of four schools located near the University of Michigan – Flint. The schools chosen were Wayne State University (n=16), Eastern Michigan University (n=6) Michigan State University (n=8) and University of Michigan (n=3).

Motivation for Graduate Study

When asked “*What motivated you to go to graduate school?*” These graduates cited two major reasons for continuing to study within the profession of social work. The first reason related to the individual’s marketability within the profession. Sixteen students indicated they needed the degree for advancement, six students indicated they wanted to increase their earning potential above the salary at the bachelor level, and eight graduates indicated they wanted the MSW for a job specialization.

A second reason graduates gave was related to their commitment to the profession and the resulting need for specific content taught at the masters level. Five graduates indicated they wanted to learn more about a topic of personal interest to them, five graduates indicated they wanted to “meet personal goals,” and eleven graduates indicated they wanted to learn specific knowledge or skills.

Choice of Graduate School

When asked “*Why did you choose a particular school?*” Four factors emerged: 1. Location (n=25) as a measure of travel time or distance was the most frequently cited decision making criteria. 2. Specialized emphasis aspects of the curriculum content were mentioned six times and convenience aspects of the curriculum delivery (part time n=5) and supporting non-traditional students (n=3). 3. Program reputation (n=10) and 4. Cost/financial aid (n=4) were also used to choose between local graduate programs.

Interpretation:

Interpreting results regarding graduate school items leads to the conclusion that the program objectives for continuing education and graduate school attendance are exceeded. One strength of the curriculum is the curriculum preparation for life long learning.

- Opportunities for continuing education experiences appear to be readily available and frequently used by graduates. Graduates become life-long learners.
- Graduates were successful attending MSW programs. The undergraduate degree appears to be valuable to other disciplines for advanced study as well.
- Graduates are motivated to attend graduate school based on professionalism goals balanced with personal obligations.
- Graduates choose graduate programs based on a balance between curriculum and logistic considerations.

Graduate School Experiences

The terminal degree for direct practice within profession of social work is a master's degree in social work. One measure of the effectiveness of the curriculum to achieve students' goal for graduate study is based on the experiences of graduates in the graduate school process. Two areas of graduates' experiences were measured: obstacles experienced and the graduates' perception of their preparation for graduate studies.

Obstacles to Graduate School

The decision to attend graduate school requires that graduates resolve the barriers to continued studies. The unique geographic and demographic variables of the student population in the University of Michigan – Flint social work program creates the possibility that obstacles faced by non-traditional students may differ from obstacles typically identified. In an attempt to identify any unique concerns, obstacles were measured as a quantitative item designed as list of typical obstacles identified by students, and the response option as a dichotomous variable (yes no). Graduates were asked to indicate all the obstacles they experienced continuing their education.

Four factors were identified by graduates as obstacles to a masters degree. These factors emerged as a frequency rating and included: Travel/Commute (42.9%), Employment Conflicts (31.4%), Financial Aid/Tuition (28.6%) and Family Obligations (20.0%). Table 8 includes other less frequently mentioned items.

Table 8: Obstacles to Graduate Studies

Obstacle	% graduates reporting "yes"
Lack of interest in school	8.6%
Financial aid/ Tuition too high	28.6%
Programs not available	8.6%
Travel	42.9%
Employment conflicts	31.4%
Family obligations	20.0%
Unaware of opportunities	2.9%
Unable to be accepted by program	11.4%
I like what I am currently doing	8.6%
Other	8.6%

Further analysis of the obstacles to graduate studies revealed interesting results in comparisons of graduates throughout the masters degree process (Table 9). Graduates anticipating graduate school are focused principally on their ability to be admitted, and do not recognize other obstacles to their continued study. Students actually engaged in graduate study identify a wide range of obstacles, and more frequently report family obligations and employment conflicts as obstacles to their study when compared to either pre-students or student completing masters study. It is also significant to note that those who have completed a masters study most frequently report that "travel" was an obstacle to completing the graduate study program. Financial aid and employment conflicts also appear to be long-term stressful events and have the potential for consequences well beyond graduation.

Table 9: Obstacles to Graduate Studies by Masters Degree Status

Factor	Percent Graduates Reporting "Yes"		
	Pre-Masters Status (n=22)	Current Masters Status (n=18)	Masters Graduate Status (n=19)
Lack of interest	0	1	2
Financial Aid/Tuition	0	5	5
Program not available	0	2	1
Travel	0	5	10
Employment Conflicts	0	6	5
Family Obligations	0	5	2
Unaware of Opportunities	0	1	0
Unable to be accepted	1	3	0
Like what currently doing	0	1	2
Other	0	1	2

One strategy identified by graduates to mediate the effects of these obstacles can be surmised from the overwhelming interest in a local MSW program. The majority of graduates (68%, n=33) who had indicated interest in attending graduate school, indicated an interest in a masters program available in Flint. Of those graduates interested in a local masters program, 36.4 % indicated that they could attend full time, whereas 63.6% indicated that they could attend a part time program.

Preparation for Graduate School

In an effort to identify the graduates' perception of their preparation for graduate study, graduates were asked "Please rate your perceptions of how well the social work curriculum at University of Michigan-Flint prepared you for graduate studies." Overall, graduates indicated that the University of Michigan-Flint social work curriculum prepared them for graduate school. Graduates indicated that their perception "strongly agreed" (mode= 1) with all of specific aspects of the curriculum identified as preparation for graduate studies (Table 10). Two areas of further curriculum review were identified by the significant variability in scores (3 students indicating disagreement) and included "library skills" and "research skills."

Table 10: Perception of Preparation for Graduate Studies

<u>Item</u>	<u>Mode</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u># 4/5</u>
I was well prepared for graduate school.	1	2	0
Faculty of the graduate school perceive UMF as a good program.	1	2	0
I was well prepared for the transition to graduate school.	1	3	1
I knew a lot of social work theory before starting graduate school.	1	2	0
I had the necessary library skills to be successful in graduate school.	1	3	3
I was better at professional writing than my graduate school peers.	1	3	2
I knew enough about research to be successful in graduate school.	1	3	3
The practice skills I learned at UMF prepared me for my graduate school field placement.	1	2	0

Key: 1=Strongly agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly disagree

Preparation in Diversity and Multi-Culturalism

Two open ended questions were included in this survey to measure qualitatively, the perceptions of graduates who attended graduate school. The first question was chosen based on one of the on-going faculty curriculum development themes on culturally competent practice. *Respondents were asked: Please describe how often the diversity and multi-cultural concepts taught at UMF were related in your graduate studies.* Replies to this question emphasized the value of the UMF preparation in this area. Seven respondents indicated what they learned in graduate school was a review of what they had already learned at UMF. Six respondents indicated that they used what they had learned at UMF on a daily basis as graduate students. One student requested more information on diversity issues for Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Transgender population. In contrast, six students indicated that they did not observe any diversity content in their graduate studies.

Areas for Improvement

The second open-ended question anticipated the existence of areas of improvement, not yet anticipated. Respondents were asked: *Please describe here, any aspects of your graduate school experience that you were not adequately prepared to handle and that we could improve in the Social Work Program at the University of Michigan – Flint.* Responses to this question can be summarized into two patterns. First, the majority of respondents reported “none” (n=46) indicated that their undergraduate program adequately prepared them for graduate studies. In addition, one respondent reported: “I am a better writer than other students in graduate school, plus the APA style was especially helpful. Second, a small number of students indicated a particular content area for improvement. The list of content identified included: “Statistics” (n=3), “Macro Practice” n=2, Paper Writing (n=1), graduate study entrance exams (n=1), Diagnosis (n=1), and aging (n=1).

Interpretation:

Results indicated that the objectives for graduate school experiences are met.

- Graduates were motivated to attend graduate school by factors that were directly influenced by advanced study (i.e., salary, employment advancement and additional knowledge and skill acquisition).
- Graduates indicated that they face obstacles to graduate school that were consistent with the expectations of graduate school: finances, location and balance of work and family obligations.
- Graduates reported that the University of Michigan-Flint curriculum offered adequate preparation for graduate studies.

Two concerns need to be further addressed regarding the preparation of graduates for the realities of graduate school.

- Although the curriculum has been successful in preparing graduates for admission to graduate school there remain three areas for improvement. Graduates requested further assistance with library skills and research skills (particularly statistics) and indicated that rigorous standards be maintained regarding professional writing skills.

- There is an interactive effect between the non-traditional nature of the demographic variables of the graduates and reported obstacles of tuition, travel, family and employment obligations. A concerted effort is needed to meet the needs of non-traditional University of Michigan – Flint graduates by offering an affordable, flexible and locally housed graduate program.

Curriculum Evaluation

The mission of the social work program states that the intention of the curriculum is to prepare graduates for employment and/or graduate study as a generalist practitioner. The survey included questions regarding the comprehensive curriculum and the concerns of constituents as seven subdivisions of the curriculum: field placement, liberal arts, CSWE accreditation, practice skills, critical thinking skills, diversity and values and ethics.

Comprehensive Curriculum

In an attempt to measure graduates' perception of the strengths and weaknesses of the UM-Flint curriculum, graduates were asked questions about the thirteen outcome objectives of the curriculum and content for preparation as a "generalist practitioner."

Outcome Objectives

The social work curriculum is structured by four program outcomes, each divided by 3 – 7 goals statements and subsequently subdivided into 2 or more benchmarks. (CSWE Reaffirmation Report, 2002). Each of the goal statements is directly linked to graduate outcomes, and are benchmarked as 17 outcome objectives, in addition to 2 or more benchmarks by content area. Table 11 lists the seventeen general statements and the rating provided by graduates according to their perceptions of their preparation for each of the program objectives. The majority of graduates reported satisfaction in their preparation for each of the 17 goal statements.

Table 11: Satisfaction with Preparation by Outcome Objective

<u>Item</u>	<u>% scores rated as 4 or 5</u>
Apply critical thinking skills within the context of professional social work practice.	92.0%
Practice within the values and ethics of social work.	98.0%
Practice with an understanding of and respect for the positive value of diversity.	94.3%
Demonstrate the professional use of self.	90.6%
Understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination.	94.3%
Understand the strategies of change that advance social and economic justice.	86.8%
Understand the history of social work and social welfare practice with systems of all sizes.	83.0%
Knowledge of bio-psycho-social variables that affect individual development.	84.9%
Use theoretical frameworks to understand the interactions among individuals.	79.2%
Use theoretical frameworks to understand the interactions between individuals and social systems.	75.5%
Analyze the impact of social policies on client systems, workers, and agencies.	83.0%
Evaluate research and apply findings to practice.	66.0%
Evaluate your own practice and interventions of other relevant systems.	69.8%
Use communication skills differently with a variety of client populations, colleagues, and members of the community.	79.2%
Function within the structure of organizations and service delivery systems.	88.7%
Under supervision, seek necessary organizational change.	71.7%
Use supervision appropriate to generalist practice.	77.4%

Key: 1=Greatly dissatisfied, 2=Dissatisfied, 3=Neutral, 4=Satisfied, 5=Greatly satisfied

Open Ended Question

In addition to the Likert type items, one open ended question regarding the graduates' perception of the overall program was included in the study. Respondents were asked: "*Please describe here, any thought you have about to share with us about your experience at UMF and your professional life since graduation.*"

Replies to this question could easily be divided into two categories: preparation for life after the bachelor degree and recommendations.

Graduates reported that they were adequately prepared for work (n= 12), for graduate school (n=5), and an unanticipated positive response of "personal growth" (n=5). Some students mentioned particular aspects of the program as contributing to the strength of their preparation: staff/faculty relationships with students (n=15), field placement experience (n=5), peer interaction (n=2) and the small class size (n=1).

A wide range of recommendations were made by graduates. The only recommendation repeated by graduates was the request to bring a MSW program to UMF (n=4). The remaining

recommendations were mentioned only by one graduate and appeared to focus on their specific experiences since graduation. Without an implicit order, the list of recommendations included: create field placements outside the Flint Area, provide more interviewing skills, teach about borderline personalities and treatment models, provide sign language classes, prepare students for the license exam, teach business aspects of private practice (i.e., management/marketing/litigation/billing), prepare students to use computers more, expand research content, in into class include presentations for different agencies, and teach person centered planning.

Interpretation:

Overall, graduates reported great satisfaction with their preparation under the UM-Flint curriculum. Quantitative data reported in Table 11 as well as the qualitative reports from the open ended question indicate graduates perceive themselves as prepared in each of the explicit objectives of the program. Interpretation of this data leads to the conclusion that the goals for the comprehensive curriculum were met.

- Each of the Likert type items measuring the seventeen benchmarked statements were rated “Satisfied” or “Greatly satisfied” by a majority (2/3rd or greater) of all respondents.
- Graduates reported being adequately prepared for employment, graduate school and some mentioned personal growth as an explicit positive outcome of the program.

Although graduates’ report that the comprehensive curriculum was adequate to meet the outcome objectives, there were areas for improvement. Based of the recommendations of graduates attention should be placed on curriculum areas of:

- Use theoretical frameworks to understand the interactions between individuals and social systems.
- Evaluate research and apply findings to practice.
- Evaluate your own practice and interventions of other relevant systems.
- Under supervision, seek necessary organizational change.
- Use supervision appropriate to generalist practice.

Seven Core Curriculum Areas

The seven curriculum subsets were first identified for the 1997-1999 survey of graduates and replicated in the 2000-2002 survey administration. These seven subsets represent the core curriculum elements in the CSWE Curriculum Policy Statement and included content areas of: Generalist Practice, Field Placement, Liberal Arts, Practice Skills, Critical Thinking, Diversity and Values and Ethics.

Generalist Practice

Generalist practice is defined within the social work program by five key elements. Preparation as a generalist practitioner requires that each graduate be prepared to implement each of these five elements. Results of graduates’ rating of their perception of the preparation for each of the five elements are detailed in Table12.

Overall, graduates reported agreement with statements that indicated they were prepared for generalist practice. Four of the five statements were rated by a majority of respondents as “agree” or “strongly agree.”

There are generalist practice areas that could be strengthened. The statement related to the 8 steps of the planned change process was rated by approximately half of the respondents as “agree” or “strongly agree”. Initial interpretation of this item indicated students would not be familiar with the specific term, given that it was not part of the curriculum until more recently.

Table 12: Perception of Generalist Practice Preparation

<u>Item</u>	<u>Percent 4 or 5 scores</u>
I was prepared to work with different types of people.	96.7%
I was ready to work with individuals, families, groups and communities.	95.0%
I know how to implement the 8 step Planned Change Effort.	48.3%
I learned how to intervene based on the client and issue.	95.0%
I learned the principles of generalist practice.	91.7%

Key: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither disagree or agree,4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree

Interpretation:

Interpretation of this data leads to the conclusion that the goals for the comprehensive curriculum were met.

- Graduates reported they were adequate prepared for generalist practice on four of the five explicit criteria.
- One measure, implementing the 8 step Planned Change Effort is an area of potential improvement.

Field Placement

The accredited curriculum in social work has a foundation experience titled Field Placement that requires students to have direct experience as a social work intern within a human service agency. This experience is conceptualized to be an opportunity to be in a learning role while practicing the application of the academic curriculum to the direct interaction with clients. Field placement is a critical aspect of the curriculum and should be assessed from the graduates’ perspective.

The strategy used to assess field placement was the use of seven likert scale items to measure graduates’ perspectives on components of the field placement experience. Overall, graduates reported agreement with statements that indicate they were prepared by their field placement. Six of the seven statements about field placement were rated by a majority of students as “agree” or “strongly agree” to a positive statement about the specific curriculum content (Table 13) by a majority of respondents.

There is one statement “My field placement was similar to the work I do now.” which was rated by less than a majority of respondents as “agree” or “strongly agree”. This statement refers to the similarity between their current employment setting and the particular agency in which they completed the field placements assignment. Since the goal of the undergraduate

education is generalist practice, this rating was interpreted as a positive response, indicating that students were prepared to work in a variety of settings.

Table 13: Perception of Field Placement

<u>Item</u>	<u>Percent 4 or 5 scores</u>
My field placement supervisor was helpful to me.	63.3 %
My field placement helped me grow professionally.	73.3%
Experiences in field placement prepared me for life.	76.7%
I would recommend my field placement to other students.	61.7%
Field placement prepared me for the transition to work.	68.3%
I had a positive relationship with my field placement supervisor.	68.3%
My field placement was similar to the work I do now.	41.7%

Key: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither disagree or agree,4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree

Interpretation:

Interpretation of these findings leads to the conclusion that the goals of field placement experiences were met.

- Graduates reported the perception that field placement was a positive experience for integrating academic work with real life experiences.
- Graduates reported favorable outcomes for the generalist practice goals of the curriculum based on the nature of the experiences they have in field placement and the relationship of field placement and post- graduation employment.

Liberal Arts

Liberal Arts is the foundation curriculum of the social work degree, as outlined by the Council on Social Work Education. At the University of Michigan-Flint the liberal arts are is defined and regulated by the College of Arts and Sciences and adopted by the Social Work program. This liberal arts curriculum includes two courses in English writing, 3 courses in humanities, 3 courses in the social sciences, 2 courses with labs in the natural sciences, 1 course in the fine arts, three courses in an “area option” (e.g., values inquiry) and two courses in a foreign language.

Graduates’ perceptions of the liberal arts curriculum provided information about the overall quality of the curriculum. Overall, graduates reported agreement with statements that indicate they were prepared by the liberal arts curriculum (Table 14). A vast majority of the respondents rated five of the seven statements as “agree” or “strongly agree” to a positive statement about a specific liberal arts concept.

There are liberal arts areas that could be strengthened. A relatively few respondents rated two statements “I was prepared for citizenship at UMF” and “ I learned to participate in public life at UMF” as “agree” or “strongly agree” to a positive statement about a specific liberal arts concept.

Table 14: Perception of Liberal Arts Curriculum

<u>Item</u>	<u>Percent 4 or 5 scores</u>
The courses I completed outside of social work were important to my learning.	83.3%
I learned how to analyze information at UMF.	88.3%
I was prepared for citizenship at UMF.	63.3%
I learned to participate in public life at UMF.	31.7%
My education transformed my thinking.	88.3%
I was empowered by my education.	95.0%
My education changed my life.	95.0%
My education made me a “well rounded” person.	95.0%

Key: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither disagree or agree,4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree

Interpretation:

The purpose of liberal arts to diversify the content of student learning, enrich student thinking processes and transform student affective perspective appears to have been met for a majority of graduates. Interpretation of this data led to the two conclusions:

- There was no need to change most of the liberal arts curriculum for the majority of the students.
- Liberal arts content related to citizenship and public life needs to be enriched for students to achieve liberal arts curriculum goals.

Practice Skills

Professional education seeks to prepare graduates who are qualified to integrate cognitive, affective and behavioral domains of learning. The profession of social work uses the term “practice skill” to refer to the pattern of instruction which begins with attention to the behavioral domains (i.e., how to intervene) and evolves toward integration of all the domains into “practice.” Students are evaluated by prospective employers and/or graduate school admissions programs based on how well they “practice” as an integration of all the learning domains. Since practice skills are integral to post-graduation success, graduates were asked to rate the practice skill instruction they received at University of Michigan – Flint.

Overall, graduates reported agreement with statements that indicate they were prepared with practice skills (Table 15). A vast majority of the respondents rated four of the six statements about practice skills as “agree” or “strongly agree” to a positive statement about a specific practice skill.

There are practice skills that could be strengthened. A majority rated two statements “I had adequate opportunities to practice interviewing skills” and “The role-plays prepared me for professional practice.” as “agree” or “strongly agree” to a positive statement about a specific practice skill.

Table 15: Perception of Practice Skills Curriculum

<u>Item</u>	<u>Percent 4 or 5 scores</u>
I learned how to communicate with many people.	95.0%
I learned to write well.	88.3%
I had adequate opportunities to practice interviewing skills.	71.7%
I learned how to assess client needs.	93.3%
I was taught to involve clients in problem solving.	93.3%
The role-plays prepared me for professional practice.	70.0%

Key: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither disagree or agree,4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree

Interpretation:

Overall, graduates reported agreement with statements that indicated they were prepared with practice skills (Table 15).

- All of the six statements about practice skills were rated by a majority (more than 50%) of students as “agree” or “strongly agree” to a positive statement about the practice skill curriculum.
- The significant discrepancy between the highest rated items (% agreement at 88+ %) and the moderately although positive ratings (% agreement at 70%) suggest some dissention among students. Practice Skill Curriculum areas that could be improved are: “practice interviewing skills” and “role plays”

Critical Thinking

Social work is both an art and a science. The professional practice of social work requires the integration of knowledge, values and purpose with practice technique. Critical thinking skills are the foundation of the integration process. Critical thinking represents the graduate’s ability to connect what they have learned academically and experientially within the curriculum to new and challenging situations they experience as graduates. In an attempt to determine graduates’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the curriculum in facilitating this integration, critical thinking skills were measured using likert scale items.

Overall, graduates reported agreement with statements that indicated they were prepared for critical thinking (Table 16). The vast majority of respondents rated each of the five statements about critical thinking were rated with “agree” or “strongly agree” to a positive statement about critical thinking content.

Table 16: Perception of Critical Thinking Curriculum

<u>Item</u>	<u>Percent 4 or 5 scores</u>
I learned how to apply theories to real situations.	86.7%
I am able to recognize when a client is different from theory.	80.0%
I am able to make appropriate judgments from conflicting observations.	95.0%
I was taught to gather information efficiently.	93.3%
I use critical thinking to maintain objectivity.	96.7%

Key: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither disagree or agree,4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree

Interpretation:

Interpretation of this data led to the conclusion that there was no need to change the curriculum to enhance critical thinking skills in graduates.

Diversity

Diversity is a component of the “purposes” of social work as defined by Bartlett’s definition of social work as a profession. The University of Michigan-Flint has adopted position statements that indicate support for a curriculum that emphasizes the positive value of diversity and the commitment to the alleviation of poverty and oppression. This position statement is represented by diversity content that is infused throughout the curriculum. Likert scale items were used to measure the graduates’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the infusion of the diversity content.

Overall, graduates reported agreement with statements that indicated they were prepared in diversity content (Table 17). The vast majority of respondents rated four of the five statements about diversity with “agree” or “strongly agree” to a positive statement about the specific diversity content. A simple majority (68%) rated one item, “Inter-racial communication skills were taught well” with “agree” or “strongly agree” to a positive statement.

Table 17: Perception of Diversity Curriculum

<u>Item</u>	<u>Percent 4 or 5 scores</u>
I am able to recognize populations at risk for oppression.	100.0%
I was encouraged to appreciate diversity.	96.7%
Inter-racial communication skills were taught well.	68.3%
I recognize different coping strategies used by clients who are members of minority groups.	91.7%
I understand how experiences of oppression can limit a client’s ability to trust me.	100.0%

Key: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither disagree or agree,4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree

Interpretation:

Results indicate that the objectives for Diversity Curriculum were met. Interpretation of this data led to the conclusions

- Overall, there is no need to change the curriculum to enhance understanding of diversity in graduates.
- One area of potential enrichment is teaching inter-racial communication skills.

Values and Ethics

Values and Ethics are connected as one of the four elements of the definition of social work as a profession. The University of Michigan-Flint has adopted the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics and an adaptation of Beistick’s definition of social work values. This content is infused throughout the curriculum. Likert scale items were used to

measure the graduates’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the infusion of the values and ethics curriculum.

Overall, graduates reported agreement with statements that indicated they were prepared in curriculum areas of values and ethics (Table 18). A vast majority of respondents rated all seven statements about values and ethics as “agree” or “strongly agree” to a positive statement about the specific curriculum content.

Table 18: Perception of Values and Ethics Curriculum

<u>Item</u>	<u>Percent 4 or 5 scores</u>
I learned about social work values in several classes.	98.3%
The program helped me learn how to apply social work values to real life.	98.3%
I was encouraged to maintain social work values despite value conflicts.	96.7%
I understand the importance of the NASW Code of Ethics.	98.3%
The value of confidentiality was appropriately emphasized when compared to real life.	100.0%
The value of self-determination is appropriately emphasized for the real world.	98.3%
The value of human dignity and worth as taught at UMF is critical to good social work practice.	100.0%

Key: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither disagree or agree,4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree

Interpretation

Results indicated that the objectives for the Values and Ethics Curriculum were met. Interpretation of this data led to the conclusion that there was no need to change the values and ethics content of the curriculum.

Emerging Trends in the Profession

The mission of the social work program states that the intention of the curriculum is to prepare graduates for employment and/or graduate study as a generalist practitioner. Since the professional practice of social work is a continuously evolving environment, it is imperative that the curriculum reflect the emerging trends and best practices. To this end, the social work faculty reviewed the professional literature and consulted with practice community to identify the emerging trends in professional development. To explore graduates’ experiences in these emerging trends, four open ended questions were added to the survey. Responses from graduates to these four questions are detailed below.

Culturally Competent Practice

An open ended question regarding the graduates’ experiences in the area of “Culturally Competent Practice” was included. Respondents were asked: *“The social work program seeks to prepare students to work effectively with members of diverse populations, termed “culturally competent practice.” Please describe here, your perception of the value of our effort to infuse culturally competent practice in the curriculum, given its relevance to your everyday life since graduation.”*

All of the graduates who answered this question reported a positive value for diversity as a necessary element of social work . Forty five of the 46 graduates who answered this question, indicated a positive perception of the infusion of culturally competent practice in the social work program at UMF. As one graduate reported “Cultural competent practice has been important throughout my educational experience at U of M. It was addressed in most classes or our practice. It continues to be one of the most important information parts of my current everyday life and career. Even the one student who dissented implied some experiences with culturally competent practice stating “I feel this was more emphasized in graduate school.”

The vast majority of graduates reported that there was a direct application of this concept in their daily practice. In addition to general daily living (n=3), graduates reported the use of culturally competent practice as integral aspects of the work effectiveness (n=15), client focus (n=7), self-reflection (n=5) and work with co-workers (n=1).

Although the perception of the curriculum relative to culturally competent practice was very positive, graduates also indicated there was room for improvement. Seven graduates made specific requests; more content in social work specific application (n=4), infusion in every class/discussions (n=2), and direct instruction in field practicum (n=1). In addition, one student summarized the importance of more content stating “I don’t think this topic can be overdone. Cultural competence is extremely important to any field of study. A professional can’t be effective with out knowledge of this approach. One has to be able to reach clients on different levels in order to have effectiveness.”

In answering the question only 6 graduates specifically referenced culturally competent practice, and/or described the relationship dynamics inherent in the term “cultural competent practice.” The remaining responses providing specific detail of the curriculum referred to component parts of the cultural competent practice equated to terms such as “diversity,” “multi-culturalism,” “difference,” “other cultures,” and “race.”

Interpretation

An overwhelming positive response to the need for “culturally competent practice” was stated by graduates. The value of cultural competence was recognized by graduates for both work and personal life. The curriculum appears to be strong in the affective content necessary for culturally competent practice.

Evidence from the graduates’ use of terms such as multi-culturalism and diversity as synonyms suggests that the curriculum can be strengthened. Providing opportunities to connect definitions of discrete elements into an integrated understanding of “culturally competent practice” will help students build knowledge that distinguishes these terms as definitions and sub-set concepts as part of their cognitive knowledge. In addition, as the graduates explicitly request, more direct instruction in the practice applications of each term and the encompassing construct of “culturally competent practice” will allow students to integrate and synthesize the skill –psycho-motor aspects of culturally competent practice.

Theory to Make Practice Decisions

An open ended question regarding the graduates’ experiences in the area of “using theory” was included on the survey. Respondents were asked: *“Please describe here, how you use theory to make practice decisions. Please be sure to include anything you think we should add to the class content.”*

Graduates' responses to this question reflect three different approaches to the question.

Some replies included reference to one of three specific categories of theories used by graduates. The most frequently mentioned category of theory was *practice theories* including terms of "strengths perspective" (n=4), "eclectic" (n=4), and "self empowerment" (n=1). The second most frequently mentioned category of theory were the *foundation theories* including "HBSE" (n=5) and Systems Theory (n=2). The third category included *field of practice* specific references to theory including "E.K. Ross" (n=1), SAT "Practice Assessment" (n=1) and "at-risk populations."

In a second approach to the question, some replies described a particular point in their practice where he/she referred to theory. Results of graduates' responses were organized into five discrete practice tasks including; Group work (n=1), observing/understanding client behavior (n=2), goal setting (n=3), decision making (n=5) and report writing (n=2).

In the third approach, some responses to the question described what was needed in the curriculum to improve the utility of theory in practice. One student requested that the curriculum add content related to spiritual development across the lifespan, and two requested more instruction on how theory is used in practice. As one graduate reported "need more role plays in what theory looks like in practice."

Interpretation

A broad array of responses was provided by graduates reflecting a diverse understanding of the construct of "theory to practice," with a seemingly even balance of foundation and practice represented by the frequency and variety of details. It appears the curriculum includes content that provides graduates with knowledge of theory and a perception of the value of theory to practice.

However, implicit in the divisions of the answers into discrete categories, it appears graduates are not prepared to integrate across theories (i.e., theories of practice, foundation and field specific) and synthesize theories of understanding with theories of practice. In this interpretation, the request from two students to explicitly instruct in theory to practice becomes the representation of the voice of the majority.

Research to Make Practice Decisions

An open ended question regarding the graduates' experiences in the area of "use of research in practice" was included on the survey. Respondents were asked: "*Please describe here, how you use research to make decisions about your work with clients. Please be sure to include anything you think we should add to the class content.*"

Among the thirty nine graduates who described the use of research two distinct categories of responses emerged, a group using research in a subtle yet pervasive aspect of their practice, and the other group enthusiastically acknowledging the importance of research to practice.

The subtle yet pervasive group (n=7) began their response minimizing the use of research in their social work practice. This group differed from the two who explicitly denied any use of research by adding a subsequent sentence (or more) providing a specific example of how research was integral to their daily work. For example one graduate wrote "*My position does not require me to conduct actual research. I have been able to use some aspects of research to help clients. I must assess and reassess my client's progress. I am required to assess my own development as a worker. I have also been able to better understand presentations and*

studies being conducted by administration.” The enthusiastic majority (n=30) answered this question by providing at least one example of how they use research in their daily practice.

Although each of the graduates (n=37) reported a specific and “small” way they use research, compiled together, the graduates’ responses suggest a broad array of research utility in practice. Compiling the individual responses, three clusters of answers emerged. The most frequently reported use of research in practice related to measuring practice effectiveness with specific elements of program evaluation (n=8), client outcomes (n=5) evaluating self (n=3) and providing data for agency reports (n=2). A second cluster of responses identified the use of research in developing knowledge for practice with three specific elements: Reading journals to plan treatment (n=6), Researching to network or find materials as part of working with peers (n=5), and research necessary to develop support materials for clients (n=2). The third cluster focused on using research in further study, graduates specifically mentioned using research in graduate school (n=4) and for understanding statistics (n=2).

Three graduates used this opportunity to explicitly request more research and statistics instruction prior to graduation.

Interpretation

It appears that “research” skills are widely used by graduates in the practice community. From the examples provided by graduates, they use specific content from the research methods course, practice evaluation skills learned in the senior paper and general research skills taught across the curriculum.

Given the caveat of graduates still learning to recognize and label research as it occurs in the real world, the curriculum may be strengthened by specific instruction in how discrete tasks that are taught are related to the expectations of professional employment and graduate school.

Graduates specific request for more content in research echo the results of the graduate survey results on other questions used to triangulate the measure of research in this report.

Inter-professional Practice

An open ended question regarding the graduates’ experiences working with professionals from different disciplines was included on the survey. Respondents were asked: *“We believe there may be an emerging trend for social workers to work collaboratively with professionals from other disciplines, termed “inter-professional practice.” Please describe here, how this trend is impacting you and what you would suggest we include in the curriculum to prepare the next graduates.”*

Replies to this question represented both aspects of the original question: explaining what graduates experienced in the real world and what recommendations they offered for the next cohorts.

Regarding the question of what the real world expected, graduates indicated that working with professionals from other disciplines was an expectation of the practice community. Of the 47 graduate who answered this particular question, only 1 graduate stated that he/she worked only with other social workers. Replies to this question emphasized two distinctions in the interaction patterns between graduates and other professionals.

The first distinction made by graduates was the focus of the interaction. Three graduates reported that they worked with other professions when they focused on the agency including

activities as agency goal setting, documentation, and budgeting. The remaining responses focused on how the graduates worked with other professionals to provide services to clients.

The second distinction was in the nature of the interaction pattern, ultimately reflecting a broad spectrum of interaction, beginning with a minimal amount of interaction and extending to encompass a shared assessment and planning process. Itemized here are the categories of responses to illustrate the increasing pattern of interaction: Observation: one graduate reported that a psychiatrist observed a client in a group he/she was facilitated. Consulting/Referral: eight graduates reported that they were asked about a client's performance or directed a client to another professional based on the professionals' shared understanding of the client needs. Case Management: seven graduates reported that they were a connecting point for several different service delivery systems and were responsible for monitoring and linking communication between these systems. Teamwork/collaboration: eight graduates reported that they worked on a team with members of other professions to plan, implement, and/or evaluate service delivery to clients.

Recommendations from the graduates regarding inter-professional practice were organized into 3 emergent themes. The most prominent and frequently mentioned recommendation (n=5) was the emphasis on teaching students the skills and personal commitment to maintain the values and ethics of social work when working with professionals with other value orientations. Some graduates indicated this was necessary to keep the team focused on particular aspects of the client while other graduates mentioned values as a way to distinguish the role of the social worker on the team. This recommendation was summarized well by a graduate who reported "keeping social work values and roles yet appreciating others."

The second recommendation from graduates was to teach new students how to use social work practice skills on the interaction patterns of team members. Two social work skills were specifically mentioned: teaching students how to use communication skills to explain social work to other members of other professions (n=4) and teaching students how to use the practice skills of "group work" to help team members handle conflict and interact (i.e., as one graduate described "professional courtesy").

The third recommendation was based on a cluster of responses and focused on providing students with some familiarity with the expectations of other professions. Specifically, graduates recommended we provide information on "change theories from multiple disciplines" and two graduates recommended providing terminology from other disciplines.

Interpretation

Testimony from the graduates indicates that working with other professions is a common pattern of social work practice. As a continuum of practice, the quality of the professional orientation of the practice varies significantly but does not reach the level of "inter-professional practice" promoted in the professional literature. From the recommendations forwarded from graduates, there appears to be some specific areas of the curriculum we can directly link to their future practice, particularly focusing on the distinctions between social work and other professions and enhanced practice skills working with professionals as peers. Should the professional community continue to encourage the evolution of practice toward inter-professional practice, the curriculum will require major infusion of the skill and knowledge base specific to inter-professional practice.

CONCLUSION

Faculty Discussion

The statistical and qualitative results of this research project described above were presented to the social work faculty for a series of discussions about the significance of the findings. Discussions were guided by efforts to identify curriculum strengths and challenges, with an ultimate goal of establishing an agenda for program improvement. The discussions were organized by the original three foci of the project: employment experiences, graduate school experiences, and curriculum effectiveness. Highlights of these discussions are detailed below.

Employment: Two conclusions were made regarding the graduates' employment experiences.

- Faculty were very impressed by the employment opportunities graduates' experience. Graduates are hired quickly. They remain employed over a long period of time. They are compensated with a salary range and benefits that allow them "economic - quality of life."
- Faculty were proud of the evidence of success in meeting our mission, to prepare students for generalist practice. Graduates reported employment in a wide variety of agencies and work with a diverse population of clients. Graduates are able to apply the central concepts of social work practice: the knowledge, values, purposes and intervention techniques of professional social work.

Graduate School: Three conclusions were made regarding the respondents' graduate school experiences.

- The program outcome goal of preparing graduates for life long learning appears to be achieved based on the behaviors of graduates. Graduates report participating in several continuing education opportunities following graduation.
- Graduates perceive themselves as well prepared for graduate school in academic and professional socialization. The difficulties they experience in graduate school (i.e., finances, obligations and travel) are beyond the scope of the undergraduate curriculum. Faculty discussion about students' graduate school experiences revealed significant concern for the quality of education our students are receiving and how they are socialized to professional action. Faculty determined that further discussion was necessary to clarify a program position statement regarding the range of responsibilities we may have toward masters degree programs?
- Faculty discussion recognized the importance of research, library skills, and professional writing skills and noted the intended infusion of this content throughout the curriculum. Faculty observed that several significant changes to this content have already been created in the two years since this cohort graduated. Future strategies to enrich these skills are discussed in the curriculum changes suggested in the subsequent section of this report.

Curriculum: Each of the ten curriculum areas included in the survey were discussed by the faculty. Separate summaries of the conclusions are detailed here.

- Faculty discussed the results of the generalist practice questions at great length. Two themes emerged from these discussions.
 - The common understanding of the distinctions between generalist and specialist education as paralleled with undergraduate and graduate studies was made. Subsequently, commitment to generalist practice was reaffirmed. “We acknowledge the competing ideologies between specialization bias of employment and state licensing exams and the generalist practice bias of NASW and CSWE accreditation standards. We are committed to: providing a curriculum that emphasizes generalist practice, facilitating the political process which negotiates the competing ideologies, ameliorating the damages students experience being caught in the competition.” As Michigan implements state licensure of social workers, the faculty is considering offering an elective course on assessment and diagnosis in behavioral/mental health (e.g., DSM IV) to bridge this gap.
 - Results of curriculum questions regarding generalist practice support the conclusion that curriculum objectives for this content have been met. Philosophical problems with the terminology of Planned Change Effort as distinguished from Problem Solving Method were discussed. Strategies to strengthening the curriculum by emphasizing the terminology and direct application of the term “Planned Change Effort” within lectures and assignments at both the junior and senior level were identified. Individual faculty agreed to add this content to the course syllabi and writing assignments for SWK 200, 320, 325, 310, 311, 400, 420, and 421 to begin by fall 2005.
- Results of questions regarding field placement support the conclusion that curriculum objectives for this content have been met. Discussion emphasized achievement of generalist practice content and facilitating the transition from theory to practice.
- Results of questions regarding liberal arts support the conclusion that curriculum objectives for this content have been met. Faculty discussed two strategies to enhance the liberal arts foundation. First, the faculty suggested periodic reviews of the content and course assignments of prerequisite courses taught outside the department to assure representation and balance of the key concepts as foundation to professional studies. Second, two changes were suggested to be made that enrich the content in social work courses related to public life experiences: adding a required legislative activity to the SWK 310 course, and adding a community connection experience to the junior year.
- Results of the practice skills questions supported the conclusion that curriculum objectives for this content have been met. Faculty recognized the fact that interviewing skills and role playing content were identified by respondents as areas of potential improvement. Additionally, faculty proposed including more of the role play, macro

practice and interviewing skills in courses across the curriculum to bridge the gap between the sophomore and junior year of courses. Commitment from the faculty was made to maintain this objective as a strength of the curriculum and infuse the content wherever possible.

- Results of questions regarding critical thinking support the conclusion that curriculum objectives for this content have been met. Commitment from the faculty was made to maintain this objective as a strength of the curriculum.
- Results of the diversity questions support the conclusion that curriculum objectives for this content have been met. Faculty discussion included review of the changes in the diversity curriculum that have been made since these respondents graduated. Faculty hypothesized strategies to teach “inter-racial communication skills” and incorporated ideas in each of the social work classes. Commitment from the faculty was made to maintain this objective as a “strength” of the curriculum.
- Results of the values and ethics questions support the conclusion that curriculum objectives for this content have been met. Faculty discussion of prospective changes in this content would favor clarifying and deepening curriculum content without altering the positive achievement of the related curriculum objectives. Commitment from the faculty was made to maintain this objective as a strength of the curriculum

Emergent Themes: Results of the four open-ended questions measuring the emerging themes from the professional social work community were discussed by faculty.

Culturally Competent Practice - Results of this open ended question support the perception that graduates will be expected to practice in the employment and graduate school settings in a manner that reflects cultural competence. Faculty discussed the significant achievement made in the curriculum related to the cognitive, affective and skill aspects of working with diverse clients. Faculty also noted we have not yet reached the point where students integrate their understanding of themselves and others with terminology (i.e., diversity, multi-culturalism) into a standard of practice. Faculty agreed to strengthen the curriculum by adding to the diversity content, a synthesis of culturally competent practice as measured in cognitive, affective, and practice skill development.

Theory to Practice - Results of this open ended question support the perception that graduates will be expected to apply theories to practice at several points in the intervention relationship. Faculty also noted that graduates specifically requested assistance with this skill in areas of role play, group practice, peer-team interactions and in macro practice. Faculty agreed to review opportunities throughout the curriculum for demonstrating the direct application of theory to practice. Faculty agreed to document the infusion of theory to practice through the curriculum mapping process of group work planned for fall 2005.

Research Utilization - Results of this open ended question support the perception that graduates will be expected to use research skills extensively in their post- bachelor professional experiences. Faculty discussion noted the progress that has been made in the research content

over the three iterations of the graduate survey. Faculty reported pride in the results of this study that indicate most graduates use research techniques in their knowledge building and are effective in using research techniques to meet employment expectations, yet faculty are challenged to make the use of research a more enthusiastic aspect of professional work. Two areas of growth in the research content were endorsed by the faculty as requested by graduates: 1. More research content particularly statistics and program evaluation expectations of employers. and 2. More instruction on the resources and technical support for conducting research such as library and computer skills.

Inter-professional practice - Results of this open ended question support the perception that graduates will be expected to interact with individuals from different professions as they practice social work. Faculty discussed the fact that a wide range of interaction patterns are used and graduate's reports of team-work offers the highest level of interaction among professionals. Faculty noted that there is a discrepancy in the expectations of "inter-professional practice" as encouraged in the professional literature and the observations of graduates in the real world. Faculty agreed to engage in further discussion about interpreting and ameliorating this discrepancy in the provision of the social work curriculum.

Implications

The future begins by emphasizing the commitment to maintain the strengths of program. The faculty has made an emphatic affirmation to continuing to provide an undergraduate education that matches or exceeds these students' experiences in employability, graduate school, and curriculum quality. Changes in the curriculum will be guided by these standards, and will focus on improvements.

As a result of the tone and tenure of the discussions on areas of improvement, issues were identified and classified as immediate or priority initiatives. Within each classification, plans were made by the faculty to change aspects of the curriculum to enhance the program's ability to achieve the student outcome objectives.

Immediate Changes

Immediate changes in the curriculum were identified and subsequently developed for implementation by Fall 2005. These changes included:

- Instructional methodology changes of increased role-plays, group projects, application of library and research skills, professional writing expectations and participation in public life.
- Develop the program's position statement on graduate education.
- Develop a Bachelor of Science degree option, with related changes in area options, research and graduation requirements.
- Develop further course offerings on special topics of graduates and undergraduates needs for connection to the community, including a bridging course and continuing education seminars.
- Implement the content review process for courses providing foundation knowledge for the professional curriculum.
- Implement the curriculum mapping process for group work content and public life.

Priority Initiatives

Priority initiatives were identified and organized by complexity of steps to achieve the goal. Each initiative is set to begin in Fall 2005, however, the completion of each task varies and completion of all tasks extends well beyond 2006. These initiatives include:

- Develop content for the Fall Adjunct Faculty Meeting to include curriculum changes and seek new directions in the curriculum from the practice community.
- Implement curriculum review process focused on each of the four emergent themes in practice: Culturally Competent Practice, Theory to Practice, Research Utilization, and Inter-professional Practice.
- Re-align the goals, objectives and benchmarks to reflect the emerging foci of the curriculum. Re-write the Student Outcome Assessment Plan to reflect these changes.

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Appendix A: Identification of Student Researchers

Great gratitude is expressed to each of the students who collaborated with the faculty to develop the research project. Their contributions are embedded in the intent and the outcome of this report. The faculty hopes that the results of their effort serves to foster further love of learning for each student and contributes to the enrichment of the program. Thank you,

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