



CHAPTER 7:
POLICY



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Selber (right)*

Chapter

7

Policy: Shaping Services and Influencing Attitudes

Crafting Leadership for Effective MSW Policy Practice

We teach our students that policy is a critical component of building and delivering effective, ethical services, and advocating for social change. Policy practice is a critical skill for social workers that expands over all competencies, including engaging diversity and difference, professionalism and ethical conduct, and advancing human rights and social and economic justice.



EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.8—Engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services. Social work practitioners understand that policy affects service delivery, and they actively engage in policy practice. Social workers know the history and current structures of social policies and services; the role of policy in service delivery; and the role of practice in policy development. Social workers • analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance social well-being; and • collaborate with colleagues and clients for effective policy action.



EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.5—Advance human rights and social and economic justice. Each person, regardless of position in society, has basic human rights, such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Social workers recognize the global interconnections of oppression and are knowledgeable about theories of justice and strategies to promote human and civil rights. Social work incorporates social justice

practices in organizations, institutions, and society to ensure that these basic human rights are distributed equitably and without prejudice. Social workers • understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination; • advocate for human rights and social and economic justice; • engage in practices that advance social and economic justice.

“Doing what’s right isn’t the problem. It’s knowing what’s right.”
—Lyndon B. Johnson

As a field student, MSW alumna Allison Finnell started a nonprofit SELAH Social Services in honor of her mother who died of breast cancer. The agency supports families of women fighting cancer. She was recently able to secure a matching grant from the Burdine Foundation.

Because the School of Social Work at Texas State is committed to producing social work leaders, the realm of policy is central. Policy shapes services and influences attitudes, and the School requires graduate students to not only analyze policy, but to reformulate and add strengths-based components to their skills, including engaging in advocacy and grassroots activism. As Freeman and Sherwood said in their classic work *Social Research and Social Policy* (Prentice Hall, 1970), policy provides four important directions for professionals:

- ❖ Policy is a **philosophical concept** whereby society seeks enduring solutions to problems.
- ❖ Policy is a **product**. It consists of the conclusions that people reach to ameliorate social disorganization and may well be committed formally to paper.
- ❖ Policy is a **process**, one by which social organizations maintain some stability while still seeking to improve conditions. In this light, policy is always changing and adapting to social conditions; it is never finished.
- ❖ Policy as both a product and a process provides a **framework for action**, guiding people to implement agreed-upon changes.

In our policy sequence, the School addresses all four definitions of policy. We embrace policy as an arena of practice, with its own skills and knowledge. Policy studies and activities not only call for finely-tuned critical thinking skills, but they demand that professionals build bridges with other disciplines to accomplish goals. Those goals, interwoven with our allegiance to values, are linked to our commitment to build a more just society. Social workers who make effective policy practice their professional home base must be:

- skilled in clear, persuasive oral and written communication;
- cognizant of the structures and procedures of policy-making bodies;
- creative and divergent in their thinking about how to solve problems and negotiate policy-making systems;
- able to develop “people skills” of openness and cooperation and mutuality;
- able to research and analyze the background and nuances of social issues;
- competent to evaluate the outcomes of policies; and
- ready to think futuristically about the intended and unintended consequences of policy decisions.

We encourage students to develop critical thinking skills throughout our curriculum, but those skills are particularly pertinent to policy. Critical thinking involves asking questions, understanding the facts and issues of a topic, and moving toward an informed conclusion. This addresses skills found in Competency 3 and related practice behaviors of integration of multiple sources of knowledge, analyzing models and paradigms, and becoming effective communicators, primary components of policy practice.

Working with social policy is an exciting task, one that stretches professionals to develop negotiation skills, entrepreneurial approaches to problems, and willingness to accommodate policy modification. Because policy work requires flexibility, policy practitioners can easily slide into dishonesty: persuasion becomes manipulation, and accommodation translates into abandoning values. So, as we teach students to be policy practitioners, we must also teach them to

Several students
in Advanced
Policy analyzed
and advocated
for syringe
exchange policies
which were being
considered by
the Legislature.
Students
advocated for
harm reduction
in the proposed
policy and
participated in
the AIDS Walk,
where they used
multiple creative
formats to
encourage
passage of the
law.

vigilantly guard their commitment to values and ethics, to continually stoke the fires of their passion to serve the disadvantaged, to remain sensitive to instruction and supervision from their professional colleagues, and to build bridges of cooperation rather than destroy them.

Because our MSW students are required to have a background of liberal arts, they bring a broad understanding of material that supports the study of policy, such as history, government, economics, and political science. They build on this base in our policy courses, and the policy course sequence is designed to build upon foundation courses in advanced policy and social welfare. Though our entire MSW curriculum is laced with the study of policy issues, our School focuses its policy content in these courses:

- **SOWK 5310 Social Welfare Policy and Services**, a foundation course, surveys the social welfare system in the US, centering on how social welfare policy has been and is currently developed and implemented, and how policy affects practice. It examines the history of social work and social welfare. Students learn to analyze policy within a historical and modern societal context.
- **SOWK 5322 Advanced Social Welfare Policy** addresses the policy environment and shows students how they can become involved. This course, which serves both Administrative Leadership and Direct Practice concentration students, focuses on how problems, policies, and services affect people of various cultures in the state and the nation. Students in this course move from the study of policy to the practice of policy by devising and advocating for a real policy change.

Content about policy is also integrated into other elements of the curriculum. For instance, the Administrative Leadership concentration examines policies such as employment laws to support students' understanding of organizational functioning. Practice courses deal with policies such as HIV disease confidentiality laws. Practice students deal with how services are expanded or constricted by policy decisions, and how practitioners are affected by policy decisions. In our research courses, students review the fundamental logic and limitations of cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses, evaluation techniques that are profoundly important for developing and evaluating policy.

Knowing Where We Have Been

The foundation for policy work is the history of our profession, a study which is rich with learning opportunities. Though other areas of our curriculum touch on historical occurrences, it is in the policy sequence that we examine the intertwined history of the profession and of social welfare services as a “base line”, so that we can compare and contrast the events of today. We need to know where we have been to know where we are going.

- Foundation students in **SOWK 5310 Social Welfare Policy and Services** examine the historical foundation of our present-day social welfare system, from its beginnings in Western Europe through its present configuration in the US. We deal with elements of race, ethnicity, class, gender, ideology,

and economics. Faculty push students to “connect the dots” between historical policy events and current policy debates.

- Advanced concentration students in **SOWK 5322 Advanced Policy** select a policy to modify and must research its history: what problems generated the policy; who supported the initial policy; and what groups are affected by the policy. Students need to understand what preceded existing policy in order to propose effective and winnable policy changes.
- **SOWK 5322 Advanced Policy** students often compare US social welfare systems with systems in other countries. Looking at the US prevalent “abstinence only” sex education model, and comparing it with age-appropriate and biologically-accurate sex education in Scandinavian countries provokes spirited discussion. Students can look at teen birth rates in both countries and draw conclusions about the efficacy of various policies.

We want students to know that administrative law and professional regulation are quite important in shaping how policies work. We refer students to the Secretary of State website to learn about the Texas Administrative Code.

Knowing How Policy Works

Social workers must grasp that policy is pivotal to service design and implementation. Policy is to service delivery as environment is to human behavior: without a supportive policy environment, professionals cannot adequately deliver effective services, just as a supportive environment is crucial to fostering healthy development. Consequently, we reinforce that because policy and services are intertwined, effective practitioners must understand policy and be committed to altering policy for the benefit of clients and society. Here are examples of how we teach students to understand the nature of policy and the policy-making process.

- Advanced students in **SOWK 5322 Advanced Policy** explore the policy-making process at the legislative, agency, and community level. Guest speakers from local advocacy and service organizations, such as Texans Care for Children and Family Eldercare, offer students insight on current policy issues.
- Advanced students in **SOWK 5329 Organizational Development** divide into a “legislature”. The faculty gives them an organizational issue concerning public services, and the “house” and “senate” chambers must individually come to a policy decision on that issue. They then must meet together in a “conference committee” to arrive at consensus. Through this exercise, students learn that public organizations are indelibly marked by the state policy-making environment. Students learn to think through how decisions are made, and how they are shaped by constant compromise and negotiation. They also have fun in this exercise.
- The School has placed students at all levels in internships with the offices of various state legislators, as well as some national law-makers. We have also placed students in agencies that deal with advocacy, policy, and/or legislation, such as Disability Rights Texas, Texas Freedom Network, Texas Network of Youth Services, and various police and district attorney’s offices.

Understanding the Complexity of Policy

Social policy is complex in nature and process. MSW students build on their liberal arts background to build more advanced understanding of the social

complexity that forms the environment for policy. We give students the tools to understand policy and to investigate policy decisions. For instance:

David Gwin won the Influencing State Policy MSW Award in 2010, with Dr. Russell receiving the faculty award for supporting David's project and legislative action. David advocated on behalf of juveniles with criminal records, urging that the Family Code be modified to allow juvenile records to remain sealed. His actions led to the introduction of a bill in the 81st Texas Legislature.

- Administrative Leadership students in **SOWK 5329 Organizational Development** study how agency policy affects services. One case they work on involves the federal mandate that agencies receiving Ryan White funds for AIDS services must use members of families affected by AIDS to deliver services. They discuss how to write agency policies that comply with the mandate but still protect client confidentiality and maintain proper professional boundaries.
- We prepare our students to write policy briefs and to give clear, concise legislative or other public testimony to policy-making bodies. We talk about their roles as potential expert witnesses in policy issues, and we stress that they need to write clearly and persuasively to advocate effectively for policy changes. Foundation students in **SOWK 5310 Policy** do simulated city council or legislative committee meetings to practice their verbal persuasive skills and practice fielding questions. They also write letters to the editor or to a legislator, to practice written persuasive skills.
- Texas State School of Social Work typically has the largest attendance of any Texas university at Student Day at the Legislature; in 2011, we sent 90 students to Austin. Faculty dismiss class and hold students accountable for reporting back on this educational experience. Students meet with elected officials to discuss public policy and spend time in the House and Senate watching legislators in action. The Texas Legislature meets bi-annually for 140 days, so students learn that much legislative work governing a state of over 22 million people is done outside of the official session.

Analyzing Issues

We give our students tools to assess the issues that bring some policy concerns to the forefront of social consciousness, while leaving other issues hidden. Students learn how to investigate policy issues, discriminating between accurate and inaccurate sources of information, while also comparing responses to policy issues in different jurisdictions. They also make the connection between how policy issues and practice issues are intertwined.

Though we anticipate that the policy changes for which we advocate will positively affect clients, the reality is that every policy has a negative component. We want students to forecast the unanticipated consequences and think proactively about how to address those consequences. This futuristic thinking requires students to think divergently and creatively. Students focus on these elements in local, state, federal, and international policy issues throughout the curriculum.

- Foundation students in **SOWK 5310 Policy** select and analyze a policy that interests them. They research the policy issues and defend them in a mock public meeting. Students must present some reputable sources of information they get from the Internet, as well as library resources.

Three students in
Advanced Policy
in 2009 chose
their policy
project as
promoting same-
sex marriage.
They not only
became certified
to conduct same-
sex marriages,
but they also
canvassed
actively to
educate people
about marriage
rights and the
lack thereof for
the LGBT
community.

- **SOWK 5310 Policy** students must write a series of critical reflection papers in which they select a specific policy issue, compare information given from multiple sources, and determine their position.
- **SOWK 5322 Advanced Policy** requires students, in addition to policy analysis, also provide a reformulation of policy that closes the gaps found in the analysis, and this reformulation must be strengths-based and empowerment focus for those affected by the policy.

Building Policy Practice Skills

Policy practice requires a great deal of knowledge about existing policies and policy options, a complicated and ever-changing landscape. Policy practice also calls for creative thinking and the ability to network with many different people. Without doubt, successful policy practice requires determination and persistence. So effective policy practitioners must be dedicated students of the policy arena, they must have significant people-skills, and they must be committed to making policy work for the benefit of clients and client groups.

Our School believes that social workers should be about the business of righting social wrongs and creating a more just society. It is insufficient and futile to mouth moral imperatives if we are not giving students the tools to make those moral imperatives come to fruition for clients and client groups. We must be accountable for our policy actions as social workers; this is crucial to the public trust as we prepare students to be public servants.

- Students in both **SOWK 5310 Policy** and **SOWK 5322 Advanced Policy** write letters to the editor or to their legislators. Students read and critique these letters for how persuasively and clearly they are written. Faculty work with students to make pithy, punchy presentations of their ideas. Students can then translate those skills of making brief but influential statements into verbal skills through either mock debates or mock legislative testimony.
- **SOWK 5322 Advanced Policy** serves all concentration students, allowing Direct Practice and Administrative Leadership students to mingle their ideas to make a more comprehensive response to policy issues. This class is built around a genuine policy struggle in the real world. Students are divided into groups, and they select a policy which they believe is unfair to a vulnerable group. Their semester project is to research the policy, either modify it or substitute a new policy, and actually sell it to policy makers. Students are graded on how effectively they make the policy change.
- Foundation students in **SOWK 5316 Practice III** practice responding to a policy/practice crisis, and being accountable for their actions as social workers. For instance, a scenario we may present to them and ask them to role play is this one: Last week you were named director of the state child welfare agency. This morning you learned that the police had arrested a foster parent working for your agency for imprisoning two foster children in a closet; one child is dead and one is close to death. The social worker assigned to supervise this placement had not contacted the foster family in three months, in direct violation of agency policy. You hear that several legislators are threatening to withdraw funding from the agency, and you are besieged with calls from the media to respond to this situation. Though you

Students in Advanced Policy can complement their activities with a creative component. A group of students analyzed and formulated legislation that strengthened supports for grandparents caring for grandchildren. The group did a Saturday Night Live parody of a debate of the law's strengths and weaknesses. Though this debate did not launch the students' acting careers, it made a poignant and hysterical statement of society's confused ideas about kinship care.

avoid the calls, when you leave the building, a news crew is waiting with live mikes and cameras rolling. What do you say?

- In our policy classes, we emphasize that one of the most effective and under-used ways that social workers can make a policy impact is to be involved in making the rules that implement laws. We encourage them to track relevant bills that are passed, identify opportunities for public comment, and participate in that process by committing their comments to writing and submitting those comments. For instance, when the rules implementing the Texas social work regulatory law were overhauled in 2010, the period of public comment drew only about 130 comments—though those rules affect more than 20,000 social workers. Consequently, the impact of those few comments were heightened because there were so few of them.
- Foundation students in **SOWK 5316 Practice III** attended Student Day at the Legislature and wrote a response paper on the communication techniques they saw policy-makers use. Students learned how powerful communication strategies can be in shaping attitudes and ultimately policies, and they realized that competent policy practitioners must be skilled, astute communicators.
- In **SOWK 5322 Advanced Policy**, advanced concentration students learn to use the media effectively to advocate for policy change. They learn to fashion sound bites, respond to difficult questions, and be persuasive in a live interview or debate. They are presented with multiple forms of mass communication and how to use media and image to effectively disseminate a message.

Linking Policy and Values

Values influence how we perceive social problems, and values shape policy responses to problems. Students must examine how consistent policies are with our professional values. Policy is extremely susceptible to biases and social pressures, and it frequently ends up being at odds with values that social workers hold dear. Faculty work with students to surmount roadblocks to policy changes, to work around them, or to stimulate enough pressure to encourage changes in the power structure. In order to do this effectively, students must be sensitive to the fact that prejudice is often inherent in lack of education and knowledge. We must educate ourselves and policy makers about the realities that affect our clients and client groups in order to overcome prejudice.

- Foundation students in **SOWK 5310 Policy** learn that citizens have unequal access to sources of policy-making influence. For instance, they discuss how much policy is shaped by back-room deals to which citizens have no access. They also discuss how the most vulnerable citizens (who may be the most affected by social policy decisions) are the very ones who are never invited to testify before Congress or the Legislature; nor are they the ones who write frequent letters or op-ed pieces or use other methods of influencing policy makers. Policies affecting children are an excellent case in point.
- Students in **SOWK 5322 Advanced Policy** prepare debates about their policy modifications, presenting both the pros and cons of their

In 2009 four
Advanced Policy
students
advocated for
legislation that
would strengthen
supports for
student veterans.
Dr. Kathy Selber
advised them.
The law passed
and is being
vigorously
implemented at
Texas State.

recommended changes. This activity allows them to explore how different people's values may influence their policy positions.

- In our policy classes, we examine major social policy changes, such as healthcare and Medicare. We look at the effects these changes have on the most vulnerable populations. Students often hear about social work heroes, like Jane Addams, who modeled a commitment to disadvantaged, vulnerable people and worked to institute or modify policies for people's well-being. They inspire students.
- We encourage our students to be reasonable and sensible about policy, balancing their policy aspirations with winnable goals and flexible methods. Students need to learn a multitude of skills, including wheeling and dealing, negotiating and compromising, being assertive and using power, persuading and convincing, and educating and informing. They must tolerate uncertainty in policy and be flexible enough to make quick changes in strategy. And they need to learn to advocate effectively.
- Students in policy classes address lobbying. We invite active lobbyists, such as lobbyists for professional associations, to speak to our students about this avenue of persuasion.
- We encourage students to be involved in political campaigns, discussing ways to make their voices heard—not the least of which is voting.
- We also encourage students to consider running for political office themselves, from local offices to larger-scale offices. This political involvement is entirely consistent with our School's mission of preparing public servants and preparing Leaders for Change.
- Another way that students can be involved in policy is to serve on agency or professional boards, and we discuss the opportunities for these activities.
- One challenge of dealing with policy and values is allowing all people to discuss their divergent views without fear of being shamed or discounted. Faculty are careful to be discriminating about sharing their own socio-political views, and in giving all students a chance to express even unpopular ideas.

Linking Policy and Delivery Systems

Organizational and budget implications have a significant impact on policy and service delivery. We want our students to be able to “follow the money” and make rational, practical decisions about how realistic policies are, given organizational and budgetary restraints.

In our School, we try not to expend much energy arguing about whether social work should be primarily clinical or primarily policy-driven. We think social workers must be knowledgeable about and comfortable with the total professional picture, which includes both clinical issues and administrative/policy concerns. Students in this School learn that policy and practice are married to each other, and it is not practical to divorce these elements. Front-line practitioners must feed policy-shapers the information necessary to make intelligent policy decisions.

- Student groups in **SOWK 5322 Advanced Policy** select a social justice issue and craft a format to creatively deliver the message, issue, or information. Students have used art, photography, video, poetry, narratives,

music, and drama. Through this project, students learn how to present policy information in creative ways that resonate with mass culture. Students often submit their creative work to the Council on Social Work's Annual Program Meeting.

- **SOWK 5322 Advanced Policy** students do a major policy project which gives them hands-on experience in crafting and marketing a policy. They identify a problem that adversely affects clients, write a policy to address it, and work to get the policy adopted. Their project is judged on its impact: were they successful in getting the policy adopted by some policy making body; did they increase community awareness of the problem; how many people were affected by the policy; and what potential the policy has for sustaining itself over time.
- Budgeting for human services is an important aspect of policy practice. Administrative Leadership concentration students learn to formulate budgets and discuss how to deal with budgeting. Field students do an assessment of their placement agencies, and they must examine the funding sources, budgeting plan, and annual report as part of this assessment.