CHAPTER 4: DIVERSITY AND JUSTICE

Social Work students prepare for Student Day at the Legislature, 2011
Practicing in a Diverse Society While Enhancing Human Rights and Justice

Building a Nondiscriminatory Curriculum

The School of Social Work’s explicit MSW curriculum is structured to educate skilled, competent social workers prepared to practice in a dynamic, diverse social environment. We weave diversity content into each course, and we offer an elective that centers on diversity: SOWK 5339 Diversity and Social Justice.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.4—Engage diversity and difference in practice. Social workers understand how diversity characterizes and shapes the human experience and is critical to the formation of identity. The dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation. Social workers appreciate that, as a consequence of difference, a person’s life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization, and alienation as well as privilege, power, and acclaim. Social workers
• recognize the extent to which a culture’s structures and values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance privilege and power;
• gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse groups;
• recognize and communicate their understanding of the importance of difference in shaping life experiences; and
• view themselves as learners and engage those with whom they work as informants.
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; and
• engage in practices that advance social and economic justice.

Context and Opportunities

Texas State University, an Hispanic-Serving Institution, has a student population that is approximately 35% Hispanic. Within the School, our student population of color is approximately 35%, with the majority of those individuals being Hispanic. Our MSW student population is primarily female and many are more mature and experienced than traditional graduate students. Many of our students openly claim to be religious, but in class discussion, they vary dramatically in their beliefs. We have a significant number of student veterans in our program. So our student body is diverse.

The school sponsors multi-cultural events and guest speakers to which students come and receive class credit. For instance, Dr. Deepak and students from the school organized a university-wide event on Islamophobia at which Dr. Deepak discussed Islamophobia and a panel of students and faculty members presented their personal experiences. For the last three years, the Director of the Center for the Elimination of Racial Disparities at the Texas State Department of Health and Human Services has spoken to students about her ground-breaking work in combating racial disproportionality in child welfare. Students have also heard presentations on topics such as how to work with families in poverty and how a Mississippi community, led by an interfaith groups, rebuilt black churches after racially-motivated burnings.

Social work students have played a key role in leading a university-wide student group called Interruptions, a multi-racial, anti-racism peer education group which aims to educate the Texas State community about racism and anti-racism. The Organization of Student Social Workers (OSSW) sponsors lectures by faculty members for students and actively seek out lectures on topics related to diversity and social justice. In the past two years, OSSW has asked Dr. Travis to speak on his research on Hip Hop and Positive Youth Development, Dr. Deepak to speak on Globalization, Food and Small Farmers, and an alum to speak about his work as a Spanish bilingual social worker.
The University Center for Multicultural and Gender Studies sponsors the Multicultural Curriculum Transformation Institute every summer. Faculty from throughout the university apply to attend this intensive training in which faculty learn to transform course content and instructional methods to intentionally highlight multicultural learning and transcend cultural boundaries. Eight of our School faculty have gone through this experience to transform eight courses.

**Diverse Contextual Issues that Make Us Unique**

Students explore, through assigned readings, lectures, class discussions, group exercises, and written assignments, many contextual issues that make each human being unique. Such contextual issues, many of which are accidents of birth, include but are not limited to age and generation, ethnicity and race, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation and behavior, physical and mental abilities, religion or creed, geographical region of origin, socioeconomic level and social class, body characteristics, speech patterns and original language, family structure, and place of residence. These are potent factors which shape a person’s identity and may affect opportunities—to the extent that some of these factors (such as poverty) are statistically linked with at-risk indicators. To meet our mission, it is important for our School to study such factors, because we are educating students to work with the most vulnerable populations.

Students learn to appreciate the many ways these various factors can combine to make a unique individual. They learn to avoid assuming that various factors are always connected. Because the faculty intentionally return to these contextual issues in every course, students have ample opportunity to examine and appreciate their own contextual factors. They learn to recognize the ways they respond to contextual factors in other people. Students come to understand that people’s contextual factors may affect the power and acceptance they have in society. They come to honor other people’s diversity, and to acquire skills they need to deliver services in fair ways. Students are prompted to think creatively about how to creating a more just world, empowering those who are powerless and desperate.

The School teaches students that this fight for social and economic justice is worthy of personal effort and professional vigor. It is one that will require life-long vigilance and engagement. This endeavor begins at home in our School, where we try to be vigilant against any policy or custom that inhibits our celebration of diversity or our pursuit to be fair and just.

We approach the discussion of diversity from the strengths perspective, helping students to see strengths in themselves and in others to fight the battle for a more just world. We also teach students that it is human nature to gravitate toward those people who are “like” us in contextual factors, and that broadening our acceptance of people who differ from us involves incremental, sometimes long-term processes of change and adaptation. Since the School focuses on developing future public servants and leaders, we are particularly interested in building tolerance for diversity and crafting just and fair services that operate without prejudice.
Helping Students Develop Self-Awareness

Students begin the diversity learning process by looking inward. Our faculty create a safe learning environment in which students can analyze their own worldviews through such activities as these:

- Students in SOWK 5308 HBSE I study how race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, geographic regions, physical ability, and other factors affect individual development. They critically analyze their own biases about “being different”, and learn about the bio-psycho-social-spiritual factors that have shaped their own lives.

- In SOWK 5324 Intervention with Families, students study their own families of origin and the cultural development of their families. They discuss how their own origins might affect their work with different clients.

Recognize and Communicate How Differences Can Shape Lives

Our School consciously works to encourage students, faculty, staff, and field staff to appreciate the broad range of diversity we bring to the table—and by extension, to affirm diversity in the broader society. Here are examples:

- In SOWK 5313 Social Work Practice, foundation students distinguish between cultural and individual differences in various models of development and human functioning. They learn to communicate about and intervene with diverse people and groups. They also identify and critically evaluate cultural constructs of mental illness. These students also complete the Kiersey-Bates Temperament Sorter, which helps them appreciate the human diversity that comes with temperament and personality.

- In SOWK 5326 Intervention with Families, direct practice (DP) concentration students explore how various contextual factors, such as socioeconomic status and being part of a vulnerable population affect human functioning and service delivery. Students write a research paper on culturally-sensitive practice.

- In SOWK 5329 Organizational Development, administrative leadership (AL) students evaluate how culture affects the ways that individuals and groups behave in organizations. They consider how to make organizations more accepting of diverse people. They also read about ways to make the workforce more diverse.

- AL students in SOWK 5325 Challenges and Innovations study the effects of supervising people who are different in age, race, culture, and religion from the supervisor. For instance, they examine the case of an agency supervisor who is black. Members of a religious cult in the community request services on their compound, but demand only white workers. Students examine the diversity issues in this real situation, and draw conclusions about the parties’ ethical obligations. They strategize about how to handle the situation.
The Link Between Culture and Power

Once students have developed self-awareness about their values and biases, faculty prompt them to learn the links between power and justice, and to study the relationship between contextual factors, the structure of the dominant culture, and the ways people may be included in or excluded from social opportunities. Students identify instances of institutional privilege and oppression. In classes, they work to develop strategies to empower clients through such activities as these:

- Foundation students in SOWK 5314 Practice II read and analyze books for an independent reading assignment, such as Roots of Justice: Stories of Organizing in Communities of Color, and Bridging the Class Divide: And Other Lessons for Grassroots Organizing.

Thinking of One’s Self as a Learner

We prompt students to value life-long learning as a way to continue to grow in cultural competence. We encourage them to think of others as informants about culture. Our courses provide numerous assignments that allow students to exchange world views with one another and learn to honor other people’s contextual factors.

- Students in SOWK 5327 Groups created a mutual aid group called “Open Talk”, in which students selected various topics of diversity (religion, sexual orientation, gender roles, politics, drugs, etc.) each week to discuss. By discussing potentially controversial topic, students learned to appreciate one another’s views and honor differences while finding common ground.
- Students in SOWK 5313 Practice I complete an Immersion Project which requires them to attend an event, view a video, and interview someone of a culture different from their own. They become more self-aware but also learn more about other culture.
- Students in SOWK 5319 Diagnostic Assessment hear from a clinical psychologist who is a transgendered person. Her professional credentials and personal stories challenge student to look at gender identity issues in a different light, transcending value differences and connecting with people’s humanity.

Advancing Human Rights and Social Justice

The School believes that every person has basic human rights, such as safety, freedom, and privacy, as well as adequate standards of living, health care, and education. We recognize that oppression crosses national borders, and we want our students to recognize those global interconnections. Students need to be aware of theories of justice and strategies to advance rights and justice.

Texas State University has developed a university-wide committee to enhance the global perspective of our university. The School of Social Work is involved...
in that effort, which we particularly focus on the issues of human rights and sustainability. Our students are taught about the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and various subsequent treaties. We teach content on human rights throughout the curriculum, but we focus this content on the elective SOWK 5339 Selected Topics on International Social Work. This course is predicated on the model of “global citizenship”, which moves beyond cultural competence and implies an obligation to be a good citizen. The model further stressed human rights literacy (basic knowledge), human rights empathy (concern for others), and human rights responsibility (action for change). Students complete a semester project exploring a human rights problem, strategizing about solutions.

Over the last few years, the School has sponsored several study abroad trips to Mexico, Cambodia, England, and India. Several of our faculty, including Drs. Catherine Hawkins, Anne Deepak, and Betsy Wisner, have presented at national and international meetings on issues of human rights. They bring that material back to class. In fact, several students have been involved in their research. In both the International Social Work elective and in the Diversity elective, students have created notable projects on such topics as world hunger, human trafficking, women’s rights, and environmental sustainability. Currently Dr. Hawkins is on Faculty Developmental Leave working on a project studying human trafficking.

MSW field students also work in settings where human rights and social justice are paramount. For instance:

- Caritas is an agency in which students work a great deal with refugees.
- Students intern in domestic violence service agencies.
- MSW interns serve in the District Attorney’s Office Victims’ Services Unit and the Police Victims’ Services Unit.
- MSW students serve in one of the nation’s preeminent GLBTQ youth advocacy and social justice organizations.
- They work in Family Eldercare and other agencies serving the elderly in peril.
- They work in various housing authorities and supported living agencies, as well as agencies which serve the homeless, such as Salvation Army and Psychiatric Emergency Services’ community crisis teams.
- Our MSW students work in state hospital settings, particularly aligned with Clients’ Rights Officers and ombudsmen. They also work with disability advocacy organizations.