

From the Editor

BSW Education—Coming Together for Collective Action

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At this point in my career I can reflect on the better part of four decades spent in social work education, most of which has been, by choice, at the BSW level. Absolutely no regrets about that, because working with undergraduate social workers is rewarding work that prepares graduates with a strong foundation in the profession. BSWs work with some of the most vulnerable clients served by social workers. That BSWs do not provide clinical services demeans them in the eyes of some. That may be one point of view, but often BSWs do case management and deal with clients' problems at a much more fundamental level to address basic needs. It is important and valuable work, and if we believe in a hierarchy of needs, then the people we serve are not able to deal with some of their higher level needs if they are worried about their next meal or where they will sleep. BSWs help with individual and societal problems that are critical, and it is honest, valuable, and meaningful work.

My duties as a BSW educator have been varied in terms of location, teaching, and technology. I have been a bit of a generalist and covered field instruction, administration, field coordination, and taught virtually every course in the curriculum. Over time, some things have remained constant while others have changed. Photocopy machines have replaced mimeographs, e-mail is used over snail mail, markers and white boards have replaced chalk, and smartphones have become much more useful than the bulky black instrument tied to my desk. Today, there are more electronics and technology in the classrooms, and we can now do library searches and reach distant students without having to get up from our chairs. We still sometimes see students face to face; tests, grades, and papers are still assigned; and all programs work to meet accreditation standards. Both stability and change have their merits, but the last few years have led me to wonder if the changes we have experienced have guided BSW education into a wilderness where we may not now be able to find the way.

My first faculty job was in a BSW program in Northern Minnesota in the early 1980s. By this time the BSW had been recognized as a professional degree and BSW programs were accredited by CSWE. But even then, many in social

work still questioned the legitimacy of the BSW, and a struggle for acceptance of the BSW was still ongoing. It was not uncommon to see colleagues deprecate the BSW as a strange creature that was not really social work and deride BSW educators as second-class citizens. But I also had the good fortune to meet and work with many people in BSW education community whose passion and commitment for what they were doing was inspiring. Those I met could recount their current and past efforts for recognition of the BSW, and there was a clear vision for undergraduate social work education's future. With time it is now apparent that this kind of hard work, inspiration, and vision resulted in where the BSW is today and benefitted the whole profession. Several of the undergraduate faculty I met years ago became leaders in social work education and practice, and others were officially recognized for significant contributions to social work education and practice.

However, once I transitioned to an administrative role in the mid-1980s, I began to see more clearly that the BSW was still not respected by a significant number of social workers. There were enough meetings where our presence was tolerated but our comments ignored, snide comments were made about the BSW de-professionalizing social work, and BSWs not being real social workers to let me know there was a big hill yet to climb. Dealing with things like advanced standing and generalist practice, although they are accepted today, were the proverbial "bare knuckle brawls." BSW program directors and faculty members often felt isolated, but the annual BPD meetings and periodic communications from BPD served as a source of support and a way to discuss many pressing issues, from how to teach a particular subject to how to prepare a syllabus, learn about accreditation, give and receive peer support, find a mentor, and address common concerns. There was an energy and can-do sense when baccalaureate educators came together collectively. But BPD was smaller then, the members were primarily program directors, and many participated actively on committees. There were fewer programs, the program directors tended to be in place longer than we customarily see today, and in that environment baccalaureate educators often seemed to know each other. BPD became an active forum for discussing BSW education and mobilizing to address common issues. Much of this involved advocacy with CSWE and NASW to shape their standards and policies. In the process, BSW educators stepped on more than a few toes and at times made life generally uncomfortable for some of our colleagues.

But much was accomplished, and today we can see significant changes that resulted from these efforts. This journal and the BPD list are both highly visible creations of the BPD energy focused on promoting communication about

undergraduate education. The continuum between the BSW and MSW, generalist practice as a part of both degrees is also a product of the volunteer efforts of the members of BPD. Now there is more representation for BSW faculty members and practitioners in social work organizations, and there is also a more general acceptance of the BSW as a member of the social work profession than there was years ago. So what we ultimately see today is the BSW as an established professional degree in social work. All of this took a lot of work and a fair amount of advocacy. Looking back, I do not miss the conflict, professional disrespect, or feeling that some colleagues were trying to do us in at times. Much of that was uncomfortable at best and unpleasant at worst.

At professional meetings in the last few years I have perceive a different landscape for the BSW. It is almost as if our sense of collective identity as baccalaureate social work educators has been diluted. In the past, there seemed to be a clear sense of purpose: We prepared BSWs for practice. Getting them ready for graduate education was a secondary consideration. Not all agreed, but that was the general sense. And we had a collective sense of identity that seemed to guide us forward. Somewhere that seems to have changed, and it is more likely to hear about preparation for graduate school. There is also a view that the BSW job opportunities for BSWs are limited. It is common to see BSW educators more excited about developing an MSW program or their personal pursuit of a graduate faculty position. Nothing is wrong with either of these, but it does tend to diffuse our identity as BSW educators when our goals for success center on graduate instead of undergraduate education. Perhaps this shift is intentional and I missed that memo about the change. Maybe it is just how BSW education has drifted with the tides of change. But some of us are still extremely proud to be a part of BSW education, in and of itself.

Traditionally, when either BSW education or practice was discussed there was an organized, passionate, and well-reasoned position presented to enhance the status for the BSW in the profession. BPD was often the forum used to organize and speak to these issues. That appears to be less common today than it was in the past. For example, at one time, meetings about CSWE standards, governance, and representation and the nature of practice were particularly intense and involved a lot of collective input. Yet now when those meetings arise it seems to be individuals presenting points of view rather than an organized group. The many changes that have occurred in social work education may explain some of this lack of unity.

There are now 523 accredited BSW programs, many more than several years ago (CSWE, 2019). As a result, it is harder for the directors and faculty members to get to know each other and feel a common bond. Increasingly, it

has become more costly to participate in professional meetings, and with tightened university budgets, many of the voices we need to be part of the discussion are not there. The number of MSW programs, now totaling nearly 300, along with the advent of online and distance education, now mean that the MSW is more accessible than in the past, and many more BSW programs are co-located with graduate programs. There is some blurring of identity between the two levels, especially as more faculty members teach at both levels.

Over the years BPD, the traditional organization for BSW education, has changed as well. Initially formed as a voluntary membership group for BSW programs that were represented by the directors, it broadened its membership several years ago. Individual members were added in an associate category that included faculty, field directors, and friends of BSW education. Although there was a richer range of ideas when the organization transitioned to individual memberships, there was a change of focus as those who were not program directors gained a stronger voice in the organization. Over time, however, this may have led to views that were less clearly identified with undergraduate social work influencing the direction of BPD. More recent revisions of the BPD bylaws have shifted the composition of the Board of Directors and leadership of the organization to include a larger proportion of at-large members. Thus, the organization shifted more to a general membership that may not be as undergraduate centered as it once was. BPD has shifted away from the numerous volunteer committees that involved members in BSW issues to a more centrally led organization with members less involved collectively.

All these changes are most clearly illustrated in the current BPD strategic plan, in which only one of the five strategic goals addresses promoting undergraduate social work education (BPD, 2019). The single goal "Further Excellence in Undergraduate Social Work Education" could be a clear indicator of the changing focus of BPD. This goal could be construed as addressing a clear vision for the BSW in the future, or it could be interpreted in a number of other ways. Without more specific language it is hard to know. The traditional role of BPD in strengthening undergraduate social work education, building effective accreditation standards, and addressing undergraduate social work practice was more clearly articulated in previous strategic plans. The remaining four BPD strategic goals in the current strategic plan appear to be more clearly focused on organizational maintenance and growth. These are also legitimate concerns for BPD in so far as they strengthen the organization's primary focus on undergraduate social work.

Some change is inevitable, and it can be positive. But significant questions are raised about whether the current direction is the way we want things to be.

Have we become complacent with the present and recent past? Are we adrift and content drifting with the currents of change? Is there any real interest in charting a course for the future of the BSW? If so, where will the leadership arise? And what is the BSW of the future? There are no clear answers to any of these questions, and there are likely many points of view on them. But one thing is certain: Change in the BSW and social work education overall will continue. If we are not active in charting our own course, then the future of the BSW may be in the hands of those who either may not understand the BSW or do not care a great deal about it.

We face a number of challenges in the short and long term, including the emergence of the DSW, the continued growth of MSW level education, and new accreditation standards for 2022. Any of these can affect baccalaureate social work education in ways we may not now predict. We must begin the dialogue about how we see things as BSW educators and become active in influencing who we will be in the future. Do we want to be generalists going forward or prepare graduates for practice or graduate education? What will our faculty look like as more DSWs enter the job market? These and other questions deserve our attention.

In the past, groups of active baccalaureate educators organized through professional meetings such as the CSWE Annual Program Meeting and later the BPD Annual Conference (Stuart, Leighninger, & Donahoe, 1993). The Baer and Frederico (1979) report that formed the foundation of BSW education was built on the work of these collective groups of educators who volunteered their time. These efforts and those of others have helped us to navigate changes over the last half century to chart a course for the BSW that has brought us to this point.

BSW educators are a professional community that must be strong to maintain the integrity of a quality education. But survival depends on communication, frank discussion, and good strategic planning. How and where will this occur? It seems harder than ever to organize to discuss the BSW of the present and the future. There are more of us and yet we are less likely to know each other. However, it does not take a huge group to get the ball rolling. Both BPD and CSWE still hold annual conferences. These are good opportunities for organizing and beginning discussions about the BSW. Although both organizations have included compelling topics as part of their programs for the conferences in the past and have made provision for organized group meetings, these are unlikely to be added unless requests are made.

BPD is the group that has the strongest connection to undergraduate social work, and it has an elected Board of Directors. Letting representatives know of

your interests is another old-fashioned tool for achieving action. Should strategic planning for the BSW be a priority? It is hard to know unless BSW educators express their beliefs.

One of the benefits of change is the marvelous technology that we now have available. It can be a good tool for facilitating discussions. There are many contemporary examples of organizing through social media that have been used by other groups. We also have electronic communications in the form of e-mail, blogs, and texts. Video conferences and chats are commonly used by faculty members today. We no longer have to be physically located in the same space. There are many ways to begin and carry on these important conversations.

JBSW, as the journal for BSW education and practice, encourages this kind of discussion in the manuscripts that authors submit. Good conceptual and discussion pieces are an important part of the baccalaureate social work literature. We do not limit submissions to only empirical pieces. The journal has carried articles that were important to the character of BSW education in the past and helped us shape our future—which is now the present. Hopefully, it will continue to be a vehicle for driving innovation and thought. However, it is equally vital for us, as BSW educators who gather with other at professional meetings and venues, to have these kinds of discussions. Then, as we have done in the past, we can be clear about who we are and who we want to be, without leaving that decision up to others to define us and the future.

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