

## Evaluating the Title IV-E MSW Education Program

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### Abstract

In light of Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requirements and the existence of curricula prior to the development of the Title IV-E Program, how do we coordinate an evaluation of the curricula of more than a dozen MSW programs? Currently, the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) Title IV-E curriculum evaluation process includes a Curriculum Snapshot, Student Focus Groups, and a series of student and child welfare worker surveys. The participating MSW programs submit the Snapshot biennially to report on how and where they incorporate the CalSWEC competencies into their curriculum, either in the classroom or in the fieldwork. The focus groups are conducted with the Title IV-E MSW students just prior to graduation to obtain input on the effectiveness of the curriculum, field experience, and other aspects of the program. The surveys are administered to all MSW students at the beginning and end of their academic programs, to all child welfare agencies and workers, and to the Title IV-E MSW recipients after their payback period in child welfare agencies. In this paper we discuss these various methods currently used to evaluate the CalSWEC training curricula; the challenges that arise with attempts to standardize the assessment with 15 schools administering 15 different curricula; and possible solutions for the modification of the evaluation process.

## **Description of the CalSWEC Title IV-E MSW Program**

**C**alSWEC was formed in 1989 at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Social Welfare as a collaboration between all of California's accredited graduate schools of social work, CDSS, Region IX of the Administration for Children and Families, non-profit foundations, the California Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, and the 58 counties. The mission established at that time intended to reprofessionalize public social services by:

- Providing financial support to MSW students enrolled in an MSW program designed for public child welfare practice competence and
- Facilitating efforts that encourage the retention of professionals in public social service agencies.

In January 1993, the California Department of Social Services entered into a contract with CalSWEC through the University Regents to provide federal Title IV-E money for stipends for full-time child welfare MSW students and for staff to implement the program.

In 1999 CalSWEC's Board of Directors reaffirmed its commitment to a variety of public human services in California and revised its mission statement as follows:

*"The California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) is a partnership between the schools of social work, public human service agencies, and other related professional organizations that facilitates the integration of education and practice to assure effective, culturally competent service delivery and leadership to the people of California."*

A comprehensive set of competencies form the basis of a specialized MSW IV-E child welfare curriculum, which students complete during their coursework and field placements (CalSWEC Web site). Students receiving the IV-E stipend also complete at least one of their two field placements in a public child welfare setting. When they graduate, students are required to complete one year of full-time paid work in a public child welfare agency in California for every year of support.

The IV-E competencies that were developed by a coalition of practitioners, administrators, researchers, and instructors in 1991 were revised in 1996 (Clark, in press; Clark & Dickinson, 1998) and again in 2002. The 2002 revision separates “foundation” competencies from “advanced” competencies, and provides guidelines for when in the course of the two-year MSW program each type of competency should be taught. These competencies were adapted by the regional training academies and subsequently used in the development of the standardized core curriculum, providing the basis for a link between the university-based masters-level education and the academy-based training for newly hired workers.

### **Educating Social Workers for Public Child Welfare Practice**

The primary access to public social work services for vulnerable children and families is through the public child welfare system. The current public child welfare system in California is, by and large, based on the application of sanctions for neglect and maltreatment rather than on the provision of services. This is contrary to what we know works.

Experience demonstrates that successful intervention and treatment depend heavily on the quality of the helper’s relationship with the client. Professional social work is based on the structured use of self in a helping relationship. Social workers provide the majority of casework services in child welfare. Often, however those persons working in public child welfare who are called social workers in actuality are not social workers in the true sense; that is, they have not been trained in social work practices. This is particularly true everywhere in California except the San Francisco Bay Area. Shortages of social workers in all sectors may be at the root of this situation. Furthermore, the consequences of error on the part of the child welfare caseworker can be dire. These conditions combined have resulted in a lack of quality control and a systemwide reliance on applying rules to family situations rather than treating each family as a unique entity.

## **Efforts to Redesign the California Child Welfare System**

The California Department of Social Services is currently undertaking an effort to redesign child welfare practice to be more family-focused, culturally competent, and non-adversarial - characteristics of the social work profession's stated values about what works to help families. For example, the long-term vision for families includes goals such as:

- Offering social work interventions to families early so as to mitigate or eliminate the effects of chronic neglect, substance abuse, homelessness, and developmental delays caused by child abuse/neglect, and
- Eliminating the stigma of receiving child welfare services so that more parents will benefit from the services sooner.

The re-design also envisions a professionally trained child welfare workforce, that will: demonstrate cultural competence; employ strength-based assessment and casework skills; practice professional social work ethics and values; and work effectively with community members and other professionals.

In order to make progress toward the vision for child welfare workers and ultimately for a system of promising practices that will result in good outcomes for families and children, we have designed an evaluation system for the Title IV-E California program.

## **Evaluating Public Child Welfare Social Work Education**

### **Why Evaluate?**

Evaluating CalSWEC's Title IV-E program serves multiple purposes. First, while it is generally believed that social work education improves practice, this assumption needs to be empirically tested in terms of the processes and manner in which this occurs in relation to the outcomes for children and families in the child welfare system. The rationale for the MSW Title IV-E program is that better educated social workers provide a depth of service and a wide range of critical thinking skills to the agency. It is also hoped that Title IV-E educated social workers will choose the field of child welfare as their career, which would provide

continuity in the system and thus better outcomes for children and families.

Second, a process evaluation assures that the educational program is implemented as it is intended. This is not to say that all schools have the resources to implement a new child welfare specialty program. Neither do all schools have equal interest or faculty expertise in child welfare. However, program evaluation can identify resource gaps and improve program implementation. Program implementation can then be studied and used as a basis for quality assurance in service delivery to vulnerable children and families.

Finally, since taxpayer money is used to fund the education, an evaluation can begin to account for the cost/benefits of the educational program to the agencies and the public.

## **Goals of the Current Evaluation**

The goal for this evaluation is to investigate the effectiveness of the CalSWEC Title IV-E program in its effort to produce cohorts of MSWs that would reprofessionalize public child welfare. This goal raises the issue and challenge of what constitutes good outcomes in child welfare, as well as where within the child welfare system we measure the outcomes—at the level of the worker, the level of the agency, the level of the clients, or at all of these levels.

## **Current Data Sources/Methods**

For evaluation purposes, data from a number of sources provide information on the progress and effectiveness of the CalSWEC program. These data sources were initially developed for specific aspects of the program, but were also intended to contribute to the overall evaluation.

### **Administrative Data**

The CalSWEC Student Information System (CSIS) is a database of information on all of the students and graduates who have participated in the CalSWEC Title IV-E Program in any way. As students enter the MSW program at the various CalSWEC schools, they provide general demographics about themselves, emergency contact information, and any child welfare employment

history. Each school continues to compile information on the students as they progress through their academic program. Additional information includes field placement agencies, the focus of their program, and county employment status for those students who concurrently work in county agencies while attending school. After graduation the students' employment obligation information is added and includes the counties where the students obtain employment and the dates that they begin and complete their payback. Information is also input on students who withdraw from the program during their MSW studies or, for some reason, do not complete their work requirement and thus must reimburse the universities for the stipend awards.

Each school provides quarterly updates to the main CalSWEC office. As of the last update, in February 2002, the CalSWEC schools had graduated over 1,600 MSWs since the beginning of the program.

#### **Evaluation Data**

On a continual basis each of the CalSWEC schools evaluates and documents the development and the progress of their program and their students. The information is used to inform the individual schools as well as the organization as a whole.

#### **Curriculum Snapshots**

On a biennial basis, the project coordinators from the participating CalSWEC schools complete curriculum snapshots of their programs. The snapshot is a document that describes in detail the various aspects of the school's program pertaining to curriculum and instruction. In this documentation the snapshot addresses the following set of questions:

1. To what extent are the competencies covered in the curriculum? (Documentation includes, for example, information about new courses, ways that the CalSWEC competencies have been incorporated into existing required courses, revisions of the Title IV-E field seminars, a listing of specific workshops for IV-E students at the schools, and instances of using presentations from practitioners in the classroom.)
2. Where, in the field placements and/or the classroom, are the competencies taught?
3. Where are the gaps in the school's curriculum?

4. To what extent are opportunities available for all students to learn the field competencies?
5. What resources are needed to close the gaps?
6. How can the learning in the classroom and learning in the field complement each other?

The snapshot evaluations are meant to be thorough and not superficial. Schools gather information for the document from at least three sources (students, faculty, and field instructors) with techniques that involve dialogue and collaboration among the various stakeholders in the program.

### **Student Focus Groups**

CalSWEC also evaluates the Title IV-E curriculum by holding graduate student focus groups at each of the participating schools. The graduating MSWs meet with the CalSWEC Curriculum or Research Specialist just prior to graduation to provide input on what they deem to be the knowledge and skills necessary for work in child welfare, the coursework that was most and/or least helpful to them during their MSW program, and why. They also comment on their field placements, seminars, instructors, and research projects and/or theses, and other matters they want to share about their experiences with their MSW program. The student focus groups provide a vital perspective from the receiving end of the IV-E curriculum and program. As described above, the schools use the information to monitor and improve their programs, as well as to assist in the recruitment efforts.

### **Empirical Data**

CalSWEC researchers have been collecting data from various sources and populations since the inception of the program. Most of the research projects are ongoing in design and include both quantitative and qualitative data.

### **Student Surveys**

As part of the broader evaluation initiative, CalSWEC has surveyed all MSW students in participating CalSWEC schools, both IV-E and non-IV-E, at the time of their enrollment and again at graduation. The questionnaires, developed by Dr. Bart Grossman and Dr. Tony Santangelo of the University of California, Berkeley, were distributed to the entering MSW students in all participating CalSWEC schools commencing with

the fall 1991 cohort and continuing through the fall 2000 cohort. The follow-up survey has been administered to the students as they have graduated. The methodology for the collection of CalSWEC student data in these surveys is reported elsewhere (Perry, 2001). The questionnaires include items pertaining to the students' reasons for entering MSW programs, their opinions and values about social and professional issues, social action, career interests, demographics, academic background, and their work experiences in public services. The data provide information to the schools for recruitment purposes, as well as information on the effects of the program on students' attitudes and values. This information enables comparisons between the Title IV-E students and other MSW students.

As of 2001, 8,871 entering MSW students and 5,185 graduating MSWs have completed surveys. The graduating MSWs will continue to be surveyed until all of the students, full- and part-time, in the 2000 entering cohort have graduated.

### **Retention Study**

Beginning in 1996, CalSWEC has conducted an ongoing retention study of the Title IV-E MSWs who have completed their contractual obligation to work in a county public child welfare agency. The study consists of a mail-in survey and a follow-up telephone interview. A detailed explanation of the methods of the study is reported by Dickinson & Perry (in press).

*Surveys:* The purpose of the mail-in survey is to examine various factors that may contribute to whether or not the Title IV-E MSWs remain in public child welfare beyond their payback obligation period. The questions relate to work experiences, job roles, caseloads, work support and social support systems, job stressors, job satisfaction, office culture, work efficacy, and burnout, the latter of which is measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson, 1986).

*Interviews:* The survey includes an invitation to a follow-up telephone interview to discuss in more detail the items in the survey. During the phone interviews researchers ask the MSWs about their understanding of the CalSWEC program and their feelings about their participation in it. The interview also includes questions about their interest in child welfare, their work

experiences in child welfare, and what they were most and least prepared for in their job. For those who have remained with their agency in public child welfare, researchers ask why they stay, and for those who didn't stay, why not, as well as what the agency and the university can do or could have done to keep them in child welfare. To date 445 former Title IV-E graduates have responded to our survey, and 219 of these respondents completed telephone interviews.

### **Workforce Study**

The CalSWEC contract includes a research initiative to survey the child welfare workforce to obtain a demographic profile of California's child welfare workers. The contract stipulates that this be done every three years. Data were collected in 1992, 1995, and 1998 (Brown, 1995; Negrón-Velázquez, Clark, Grossman, & Brown, 1996; Perry, Limb, & Clark, 2000; Santangelo, 1992). Methods differed somewhat in the three workforce surveys. The 1998 study has the most reliable data, which included information on licensure, job description, caseload size and ethnicities of clients, the numbers of vacant positions in the agencies, and worker demographics. The state conducted a large longitudinal workload study in 2000, which precluded the CalSWEC study for 2001. Plans are in the offing, however, for CalSWEC to conduct another workforce study in the near future.

## **Methodology Challenges**

Given the diversity of the data sources listed above, we face a number of challenges in our efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of the CalSWEC program. California has a diverse, state-monitored, county-administered public child welfare system. Child welfare agencies differ radically in size and composition across the state. Los Angeles County alone, for example, serves one-fourth of the state's children in child welfare, receiving 125,790 referrals in 2001 as opposed to Alpine County, which received 5 referrals in 2001 (Needel et al. 2002). In the larger counties, offices or units specialize in particular facets of child welfare, but in some of the lesser populated counties one office will manage the entire spectrum of child welfare services.

The CalSWEC schools also differ in the manner and form that they deliver their curricula. Some satellite campuses that do not

have programs of their own participate in a distance learning program developed and produced at CSU, Long Beach. This exemplifies only one of the different modes of learning.

The evaluation process faces many other challenges that arise by virtue of the diversity in the child welfare system and the IV-E MSW programs across the state. Below, we list some of the major issues we face in our current evaluation, as well as those issues that will complicate any revisions to the process.

### **Sampling Strategies**

Thus far we have attempted to sample the entire population within each sampling frame in the design of the various CalSWEC studies. Can we maintain the validity and reliability of the data and yet use a more efficient sampling strategy in our evaluation? If so, how should we sample? California is a 58-county state with a broad spectrum in population size, type, composition, status, and so on across the state. Can we effectively design a sampling strategy to capture all of California's diversity?

### **Sample Composition**

Who should we sample? How can we obtain input from families? These are some of the questions that we face. To date we have data on the students and the workers. These sample populations represent only one aspect of the child welfare system. Therefore, we are considering the possibility of sampling the client population. We run into difficulties, however, when dealing with child participants, not only with human subjects approval for surveying or interviewing minors, but also in obtaining court approvals. Attorneys are understandably very cautious and conservative as they protect their clients. However, data from client sources would provide invaluable information that would complement the data that we already have.

### **Timing**

The timing of data collection can sometimes prove problematic. We learned from the graduating MSWs in our focus groups that talking with them just prior to graduation compromises the integrity of the data. At that time most students are under intense pressure as they finish their studies, and admit that their critical thinking processes lack clarity. Students also said they found it difficult to accurately assess the effectiveness of their

MSW programs until at least three months after graduation. This is further complicated by the timing of the onset of their work in public child welfare. Some graduates begin their payback immediately after graduation; however, by contract they have up to six months to find employment. If we use a single point in time for data collection the results of the assessment would be compounded by whether or not the graduate has found work. Controls for the impact of the work environment would have to be instituted.

### **Instrumentation and Measurement**

Ongoing research, such as in the design of many of CalSWEC's studies, carries some drawbacks. Over time the data are likely to highlight limitations in the original instruments. In our surveys, we have found that there are some questions we wish we had asked and didn't, others we wish we had asked in a different way, and some that we find now we needn't have bothered to ask. However, surveys, questionnaires, and interviews cannot be altered appreciably without affecting the validity and reliability of the responses and compromising the analyses.

### **Outcomes**

A hot topic in child welfare research recently is outcomes. Do programs lead to good outcomes? This begs the question of what constitutes good outcomes. Many studies rely on the counts or numbers of placements and recidivisms and the like. Although the information is, for the most part, easily obtainable through administrative data, the results can be deceiving. Does placement always mean good outcome? Many researchers now opt instead to measure client satisfaction or child well-being. These are questions that we would like to pursue despite the challenges in collecting these data.

### **Intervening Variables**

Interviewing graduate MSWs about the efficacy of the MSW program in regard to their work in child welfare is compromised by the training that is obligatory for most new hires in public child welfare. It may be difficult to tease apart the impact of the IV-E education from the training, particularly when the two are related and in most cases based on the same set of social welfare competencies.

Efforts to interview clients about the efficacy of their social workers is aggravated by the fact that each child welfare client generally sees a different social worker at each stage of the process. How does one determine, therefore, whether outcomes are due to the efforts of a particular social worker? Which among the various outcomes are related to social worker A, social worker B, or social work C? Clients may indicate that they like one or the other of the social workers with whom they have worked, but to tie specific outcomes with specific workers presents a design challenge.

In addition, agency human subjects' committees are often reluctant to give permission for the type of study that includes interviewing clients, most especially when the clients are children. Human subjects committees also scrutinize and limit the questions that are asked of children.

## **Conclusion**

After ten years of development, progress, and evaluation, the California Social Work Education Center is ready to reassess and modify their curriculum evaluation. During those ten years CalSWEC's consortium expanded from ten MSW programs to fifteen. CalSWEC is also currently developing a broader continuum base that would include a BSW program. The competencies upon which the CalSWEC curricula are based have been revised at the national level by NASW in the last year, and in-house twice, most recently in 2002. The statewide Child Welfare Stakeholders group has completed the second year of its redesign of the child welfare program and despite a budget is venturing into year three, the implementation of the redesign. The Federal Review currently in process prompts the child welfare system to revamp goals, structure, and outcomes. It follows, therefore, that our evaluation should be linked to the federal review outcomes.

Considering all of the above changes and developments, the time is ripe for a reassessment of the evaluation process of the CalSWEC Title IV-E curriculum. We therefore framed our presentation to draw on the expertise of the symposium participants to appraise our current evaluation procedures with a fresh and learned eye that would point us in the direction of an appropriate modification or total redesign of our evaluation process.

### **Research Agenda**

As CalSWEC moves forward with this reassessment, many questions emerge. Below are examples of questions that were passed NHSTES for discussion:

- Who gets what education? Who tests out of what? Who's making the decisions about who needs what kind of education?
- How much? How often?
- Who is admitted?
- How much do we spend on education?
- How do we know it works? (Can better education be connected to better practice?—chain of evidence?)
- Why should we keep funding it?
- How is education related to retention/turn over?
- How long do we have to keep educating new MSWs for child welfare work?
- What new skills do educators need to learn?
- How can CalSWEC allot resources for supporting educators?
- What are the agreed upon outcomes for MSW education? What should they be able to do?
- Can we go beyond self-report methods of program evaluation?
- How do we avoid a Type III error (evaluation of something that didn't happen).
- What drives/restrains the transfer of learning process?
- Whose responsibility is it for student learning?

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