

RICHARD STOCKTON COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY

# EVIDENCE

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

MAY 2005

## IN THIS ISSUE of EVIDENCE

### **Special Report: Assessment in Stockton's Social Work Program**

#### **Program Assessment in Social Work**

Diane S. Falk

Over the years, the Social Work Program faculty has engaged in considerable discussion of how to determine its effectiveness in producing graduates who are well prepared for the challenges they will face as employees, citizens, and human beings. As an externally accredited program, we also have had to consider accreditation standards and how to assure ourselves and our accrediting body, the Council on Social Work Education, that we are meeting or exceeding these standards. Our program has developed a comprehensive assessment plan, carried it out, and utilized the results to modify and strengthen the program.

#### **STEP ONE: DEVELOPING AN ASSESSMENT PLAN**

As we began our last Self-Study in preparation for the site visit by our accrediting body, we developed a comprehensive plan for measuring the achievement of Program Objectives. Rather than try to discover one instrument that could fully measure our objectives, the plan included multiple measures, including the following:

Course Evaluations: For a number of years, we have selected one section of each course every year and surveyed students to determine their views on how successfully the course has met its stated objectives. This has provided valuable feedback for us in enhancing the courses.

The BEAP: We also wanted to be able to compare our students with other students nationwide who are enrolled in baccalaureate social work programs. For this purpose, we used an instrument that had been developed by a group of social work educators and researchers specifically for this purpose—the Baccalaureate Education Assessment Package (BEAP). The BEAP had been used by more than 100 such programs, and national norms have been published. The BEAP consists of six survey instruments, as follows:

- Entrance Survey (demographic and other information gathered from students who are formally entering the Social Work Program, i.e., beginning their first practice class at the beginning of their junior year)
- Social Work Values Inventory at Entrance (perceptions of social work values, gathered from students who are formally entering the Social Work Program, i.e., beginning their first practice class at the beginning of their junior year)
- Exit Survey (demographic and other information gathered from students who are about to graduate)
- Social Work Values Inventory at Exit (perceptions of social work values, gathered from students who are about to graduate)
- Alumni Survey (information gathered from students who graduated two years ago)
- Employer Survey (information about the performance of graduates, gathered from employers of our graduates)

Although we were disappointed with the return rates on the Alumni and Employer Surveys, we achieved almost 100% return rates on the four Entrance and Exit Surveys. These surveys only indirectly address our program objectives, but they did provide us with

valuable information about our students that eventually led to significant program modifications.

Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey: Since the BEAP Exit Survey did not specifically assess our Program Objectives, we designed our own exit survey. This has been administered to graduating seniors on several occasions and has provided valuable feedback to us.

Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET): This instrument, used across programs in the College, can provide valuable feedback to individual instructors.

Field Evaluations: An essential component of social work education is experiential learning. Every social work student must complete 490 hours of supervised field experience in a social agency. At three points in time during their internships, field instructors complete a comprehensive evaluation of the students' performance in the agency. To give us an opportunity to examine how our field instructors (who often become employers of our graduates) rate our students, we sampled five years worth of field evaluations of seniors and performed a qualitative analysis of field instructor narrative evaluations of student progress. Although the analysis took considerable time and effort, the results yielded some very useful feedback on field instructors' views of the strengths and weaknesses of our senior students as a group. In Spring 2002, we added a check-off form to the narrative on the Field Evaluation (a Likert scale), which gives us the ability to perform both qualitative and quantitative analyses on field evaluations.

We needed to establish criteria for success in meeting program objectives. Although certainly desirable, it is not reasonable to expect that 100% of our students will meet the highest level of preparation on every program objective. For instruments that used a 5-point scale, we decided that a realistic goal would be for at least 70% of ratings would be either at the very highest level or the next highest level, for example "Extremely Well Prepared" or "Very Well Prepared." It is difficult to talk about criteria for success when measures are qualitative; with our qualitative measures, we looked for program strengths and weaknesses.

## **STEP TWO: REVIEWING RESULTS**

Once data is compiled and analyzed, our faculty members meet to reflect on the implications of the findings for ongoing Program development. Program modifications are then debated, voted upon, and adopted; and a plan for implementing the changes is developed. Further evaluation of the effectiveness of the Program modifications themselves in achieving Program objectives is undertaken, and the cycle continues. The following summarizes our most recent results obtained from all methods of assessing each program objective.

### Program Objective 1: Apply critical thinking skills within the context of professional social work practice

The achievement of this objective was measured by four different instruments—the Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey, two course evaluations, and the Quantitative Analysis of Senior Field Evaluations. According to the results (all 87% or above), we do very well on this objective. The Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey and the two course assessments are student self-assessments. It is not surprising that students believe that they possess excellent critical thinking skills, but this particular method of measuring success certainly raises some concerns about validity. However, the ratings of field instructors (Quantitative Analysis of Senior Field Evaluations) appear to confirm the self-assessment ratings.

### Program Objective 2. Practice within the values and ethics of the social work profession and with an understanding of and respect for the positive value of diversity

We have a number of ways of measuring achievement of this objective. Six of the measures were student self-evaluations—the Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey, the BEAP Exit Survey, and the four course evaluations. Students generally rated the Program as very successful in teaching them to practice within the values and ethics of the profession (with results ranging from 78% to 98% successful). Again the validity of these results would be questionable, but validity is supported by the field instructors, who rate students as 93% successful on this objective. We were happy to note that practicing within the values and ethics of the social work

profession was one of the strengths most frequently mentioned by field instructors in the narrative field evaluations.

Program Objective 3. Demonstrate the professional use of self

For this objective, we used four student self-evaluations (the Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey, the BEAP Exit Survey, and two course evaluations) and one field instructor evaluation (the Quantitative Analysis of Senior Field Evaluations). Students rated themselves highly on the mastery of this concept, with scores that ranged from 72% successful to 88% successful. The student self-assessments were again confirmed by field instructors, who rated students as 85% successful in accomplishing this objective.

Program Objective 4. Understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and apply the strategies and skills of change that advance social and economic justice

For this Program objective, we used four student self-assessment instruments (the Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey, the BEAP Exit Survey, and two course evaluations). Although students felt very confident about having accomplished this objective at the completion of the Ethnic and Minority Relations course, they were less confident at the conclusion of their studies—particularly as measured by the Exit Survey and the Senior Seminar course evaluation. We are not certain why this is, but we decided, after reviewing these results, to implement some program changes (see below). Field instructors, however, rate students more highly than students rate themselves—an interesting result.

Program Objective 5. Understand the history of the social work profession and its current structures and issues

The methods that we are currently using for measuring success with this objective are student self-evaluations (Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey and BEAP Exit Survey). All students who had taken the relevant course met our criterion for success.

Program Objective 6. Apply the knowledge and skills of generalist social work to practice with sys-

tems of all sizes

To evaluate this objective, we used three student self-reports—the Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey, the BEAP Exit Survey, and three course evaluations. The results show that students feel well prepared to apply the knowledge and skills of generalist social work to practice with systems of all sizes. This is not surprising, because this objective reflects the primary purpose of the practice sequence—and students are generally very focused on obtaining practice knowledge and skills. Field instructors also rated the achievement of this objective very highly—88% on the Quantitative Analysis of Senior Field Evaluations and frequently mentioned as a strength in the Qualitative Analysis of Senior Field Evaluations.

Program Objective 7. Apply knowledge of bio-psycho-social variables that affect individual development and behavior, and use theoretical frameworks to understand the interactions among individuals and between individuals and social systems (individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities)

Students feel that they are well prepared in the knowledge of bio-psycho-social variables and theoretical frameworks, according to the Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey and the BEAP Exit Survey. Field instructors also rated students as doing well in this area on the Quantitative Analysis of Senior Field Evaluations.

Program Objective 8. Analyze the impact of social policies on client systems, workers, and agencies

The success of this objective is currently being measured by six different student self-evaluations (Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey, the BEAP Exit Survey, and four course evaluations). Ratings from all data sources met our criterion for success.

Program Objective 9. Evaluate research studies and apply findings to practice, and, under supervision, evaluate their own practice interventions and those of other relevant systems

For this objective, we are using two student self-evaluations (the Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey and the BEAP Exit Survey). Students do not feel confident that they are able to meet this crite-

tion, since both ratings were below the criterion we established for success. We have had a number of discussions in Program meetings about students' anxiety about having to take a research course. Faculty members have been challenged to find innovative ways to approach the teaching of research, with some beneficial results. See discussion of program modifications that follows.

Program Objective 10. Use communication skills differentially with a variety of client populations, colleagues, and members of the community

To evaluate success with this objective, we have used three student self-evaluations (Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey, BEAP Exit Survey, and one course evaluation). According to the results of the self-evaluations, students feel well prepared in communication skills. The two field instructor evaluations that we used (Qualitative Analysis of Senior Field Evaluations and Quantitative Analysis of Senior Field Evaluations) both supported students' self-evaluations.

Program Objective 11. Use supervision appropriate to generalist practice

For this objective, we used two student self-evaluations (Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey and BEAP Exit Survey). According to the results, students feel well prepared to use supervision. Field instructors validate students' self-assessment. Eighty-six per cent see students performing at an above average or exceptional level in the use of supervision, according to the Quantitative Analysis of Senior Field Evaluations. The use of supervision was also repeatedly mentioned as a strength in the Qualitative Analysis of Senior Field Evaluations.

**STEP THREE: USING THE RESULTS TO MODIFY OUR PROGRAM**

On a number of the measures, there were two Program Objectives in which student performance did not meet the threshold of at least 70% success. These were Program objective 4 (Understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and apply the strategies and skills of change that advance social and economic justice) and Program Objective 9 (Evaluate research studies and apply findings to practice, and, under supervision,

evaluate their own practice interventions and those of other relevant systems). At first the relatively low rating on the first objective above surprised us. We spend considerable time in our classes discussing oppression and discrimination, and students appear to develop sensitivity to and a solid understanding of these issues. After exploring this issue with the students, we learned that students feel that they do not have enough confidence in their ability to "apply the strategies and skills of change that advance social and economic justice." To strengthen our Program's ability to enhance students' confidence in working to advance social and economic justice, we have adopted these strategies:

1. Practice instructors have developed ways to reinforce learning from earlier courses, such as Ethnic/Minority Relations. For example, Senior Seminar instructors include units on effecting social change and on working cross-culturally.
2. The Social Work Program now encourages students to participate in the statewide student conference on Affecting State Policy.
3. The Program also supports students to participate in lobby days (sponsored by the National Association of Social Workers) in Trenton and Washington.

We were not very surprised that students feel somewhat uncertain about their abilities in research. To prepare students more effectively to understand and use research, we have done the following:

4. Research instructors are adopting new approaches to teaching research. For example, one instructor has developed her own booklet to get research concepts across in a more student-friendly way. Research instructors are also using more in-class exercises and to find more active ways to get students involved in research.
5. In the Senior Seminar, instructors are making concentrated efforts to assure that students are exposed to the research literature and discuss how the findings of research can be applied to their practice.

In the qualitative analysis performed on a sample of five years of Senior Field Evaluations, field instructors were asked to list the professional activities assigned to their senior social work interns. Field instructors reported a range of activities. All social work students in senior field placements should experience certain activities, such as Intake/

Assessment, Documentation, Community Resources, Attending Meetings, Case Management, and Interviewing. The results suggest that all students in field may not be having the opportunity to practice in all areas. To address this issue, we are doing the following:

6. Seminar instructors and the Field Coordinator agree to clarify with field instructors the minimal types of educational experiences that all students are expected to have.

When field instructors were asked to discuss the strengths of the students assigned to them, concern and initiative were mentioned very frequently. Stockton students appear to be confident enough to take initiative in their agency assignments. Students' understanding of agency and ability to use supervision are essential skills for beginning social workers, and it appears that field instructors were impressed by students' preparation in these areas. The number of strengths mentioned, as opposed to weaknesses, reflects field instructors' general enthusiasm about Stockton students; and as the data shows, these strengths cover a wide range of behavior.

Field Instructors, even when encouraged by the structure of the Field Evaluation form, had more difficulty finding student weaknesses. Lack of confidence is to be expected among beginning social workers, yet it was only mentioned in 16% of the evaluations as a weakness. Relations with clients were mentioned as a weakness in 16% of the evaluations. This needs to be put into perspective by noting that in 50% of the evaluations relationship skills were mentioned as a strength. The interpretation here is that a small percentage of students appear to have difficulty in this area.

The Quantitative Analysis of Senior Field Evaluations revealed that field instructors rated interns very highly; in fact, no Program Objective was rated at less than 80% of students at the above-average or exceptional performance level. This either means that our students are exceptional or that field instructors tend to rate students too highly.

To address some of the issues uncovered in the

Qualitative and Quantitative analyses of Senior Field Evaluations, we have done the following:

7. We are initiating more frequent contact between practice classroom instructors and field instructors when relationship skills are identified (in Field Evaluation narratives) as a problem area.
8. Since the ratings on our Field Evaluation quantitative scale are difficult to interpret and may reflect a lack of uniform criteria for evaluation among field instructors, we are providing additional training and support to field instructors, so that we can be certain of what their ratings of students reflect.

The BEAP summarized demographic data. One finding, which was not at all a surprise, was that students in our Program are predominantly female (90.6%). This, of course, represents a historical trend in the social work profession, one that unfortunately helps to perpetuate the relatively low pay and status of the profession. To address this:

9. In an attempt to attract more males to the Program and to the profession, we have decided to schedule more of our male professors to teach in the Introduction to Social Work course.

Another finding of the BEAP is that a very high percentage (81.3%) of our students indicate that they plan to be employed during their studies. Many of the employed students work a significant number of hours per week (average 25.14). An even higher percentage (85.7%) of our exiting students report that they worked for pay during their studies than had planned on doing so (81.3%). They also worked more hours per week (average of 27.42) than they had planned. This creates a high level of stress in the students, and it also puts some pressure on instructors to modify their expectations of the amount of work that students can do. In an attempt to alleviate this type of student stress:

10. Our Program has begun to allow students to be paid for their internships and to explore possibilities for encouraging agencies to consider offering more paid internships.

Results of the BEAP indicated that only 8.1% of entering students have some fluency in Spanish.

11. Given the demand for bilingual, Spanish-speaking

social workers in the region, our Program developed a new initiative. Students have been encouraged to take a sequence of three courses created by the Social Work Program faculty: Spanish for the Human Service Professional, Costa Rica: Life and Culture (a study tour preparatory course), and Spanish Immersion Seminar (a language immersion study tour to Costa Rica).

The BEAP indicated that the average age at entrance to the Social Work Program is 28.7. This actually reflects a bimodal distribution: traditional and non-traditional students. To serve the needs of non-traditional students more effectively:

12. The Program decided to increase the number of evening class offerings.

The BEAP also indicated that a very high percentage of our graduating students (87.8%) are planning further education after their B.S. degree.

13. This has sensitized us to the need to provide more assistance in preparing students for graduate study.

Although on the BEAP over 37% of graduating students rates the help they received in course selection and curriculum planning as “very good” to “superb,” and another 29% rates it as “good” to “very good,” some 34% rate it as “adequate” or less than adequate. In an attempt to improve our score:

14. We have rewritten our Social Work Program Student Handbook to make it clearer and more user-friendly and will continue to encourage students to make good and frequent use of their preceptors.

Also on the BEAP our Program scored lower than national norms on students’ ratings of the help they received in career planning. To address this:

15. One of the modifications we have recently made to our Program may help somewhat in this area: we decided to adopt a new text in our Introduction to Social Work course. This book introduces students to a wide range of social work careers and will hopefully give students a head start on thinking about their future.

The BEAP indicated that, in terms of knowledge, the only area where students’ rating is somewhat low

(6.84 on a scale of 1-10) is in knowledge about organizational development. To address this:

16. Although this topic is covered in the second semester of our junior methods course, our Program decided to strengthen the curriculum in this area by adding a unit at the beginning of the Senior Seminar on organizations.

Finally, our faculty finds it useful to review their own SET’s as a means of self-reflection on their teaching effectiveness as perceived by students. Such review can provide a powerful incentive for faculty members to reflect on, and make changes in, teaching approaches. Changes in teaching approaches, of course, can result in Program modification. As one example of such modification:

17. Feedback from our students has led us to use lecturing less frequently and to incorporate a wider variety of experiential approaches into our teaching methods.

### **FUTURE PLANS**

The major challenge we are facing right now is that we have significantly revised our Program Objectives. This will necessitate a major revision of our Stockton Social Work Program Exit Survey, as well as assuring that all of our course objectives reflect the new Program Objectives.

With the receipt of a major federal child welfare training grant, the Social Work Program is now challenged to develop a method of assessing how effectively its new Child Welfare Concentration is preparing students to achieve a set of competencies in social work practice in child welfare. This is requiring us to partner with field instructors in child welfare agencies to develop and pilot a new assessment instrument. We plan to initiate its use within the next few months.

The Program will continue to use the assessment activities outlined throughout this article periodically, and it will review results and engage in ongoing program modification. Since our students and the social environment in which they live, study, and work are always changing, program evaluation needs to be a continuous process. Only this way can we maintain our relevance and excellence.