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## Promising Innovations in Child Welfare Education: Findings From a National Initiative

Virginia C. Strand, Alan J. Dettlaff, and Margaret Counts-Spriggs

For many years, schools of social work have engaged in partnerships, especially with public child welfare agencies, to prepare a competent and professional child welfare workforce through the mechanism of Title IV-E training. In 2008 the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) established an additional resource for preparing students in social work schools for child welfare practice. Twelve NCWWI traineeship programs supported a diverse group of BSW and MSW students from 2008 to 2013 and prepared them for client-centered practice informed by child welfare and leadership competencies. This article highlights a curriculum innovation in an MSW program and a field innovation in a BSW program that were designed to increase the readiness of BSW and MSW students for child welfare practice.

Recruitment and retention of a competent child welfare workforce has emerged as a central challenge in child welfare in recent years. Turnover in child welfare agencies is high, averaging 20% a year in public agencies and 40% in private agencies. There is some evidence that MSW trained workers stay longer than others (Okamura & Jones, 1999; Rosenthal & Waters, 2006). High rates of staff turnover are thought to contribute negatively to the quality of services that can be provided as well as to low staff morale and the cost of constantly training new staff. For all these reasons, emphasis on recruiting the right staff for child welfare and creating working conditions to improve retention have become the focus of research and training activities.

This article focuses on preparation of social work students for child welfare practice. Schools of social work have been responding to the need to develop a workforce that is well suited for child welfare practice. For many years, schools of social work have engaged in partnerships, especially with public child welfare agencies, to prepare a competent and professional child welfare work force through the mechanism of Title IV-E training. In 2008 the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI), created with the purpose of building the capacity of the nation's child welfare workforce, established an additional resource for preparing students in social work schools for child welfare practice. Twelve NCWWI traineeship programs supported a diverse group of BSW and MSW students from

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2008 to 2013 and prepared them for client-centered practice informed by child welfare and leadership competencies. This article highlights a curriculum innovation in an MSW program and a field innovation in a BSW program that were designed to increase the readiness of BSW and MSW students for child welfare practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In a study of 12 jurisdictions undergoing reform based on litigation, findings revealed that whether or not litigation was under way, a prime focus for child welfare agencies was increasing the quality of frontline practice (i.e., competency in family engagement, development of a treatment plan), developing a training focus on the acquisition of meaningful competencies, and establishing supervisory competencies (i.e., timeliness of performance reviews) (Farber & Munson, 2010). Nationally, education incentives as well as on-the-job training are identified as key factors in recruiting frontline staff and in retaining employees (Gomez, Travis, Ayers-Lopez, & Schwab, 2010).

Findings from a study of Title IV-E graduates (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009) reveal that traineeship programs seem to be preparing graduates who felt competent to undertake child welfare practice. The quality and ability of the MSW program predicted commitment to stay in public child welfare. Factors associated with retention in this group were commitment to the public child welfare agency and child welfare practice. This supported earlier findings that participation in Title IV-E programs predict retention (Rosenthal & Waters, 2006). An evaluation of newly hired public child welfare workers revealed that MSWs had greater worker knowledge of child welfare-related content than non-MSWs (Bagdasaryan, 2012). An evaluation of a preservice training program using a pre- and posttest design found that Title IV-E staff functioned higher at both time points than non-Title IV-E staff. The level of education (master's degree) and discipline (social work) predicted better performance (Franke, Bagdasaryan, & Furman, 2009). However, in a study of Title IV-E MSW graduates (Morazes, Benton, Clark, & Jacquet, 2010), it was found that those who chose to stay in child welfare did not differ from those who left in terms of their commitment to children and families. A major factor in decisions to leave was the disconnect between what the MSW program prepared them to do and the realities of agency practice.

The emergence of *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) that outline 10 competencies for social work education Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008) has increased attention to the role of competencies in MSW and BSW programs. The shift from an emphasis on measuring the objectives of a social work program to the accomplishment of outcomes (Petracchi & Zastrow, 2010) renewed attention to students' achievement. A study reports on a school of social work's efforts to connect child welfare competencies to the EPAS competencies. They found that the framework allowed agency assessment of competency achievement (Fitch, Kaiser, & Parker-Barua, 2012).

Those in the child welfare field have been grappling with the perceived need for competency-based education and training for more than a decade. The driving force is the need to increase the specific, identifiable knowledge, skills, and values for the child welfare workforce. Caseworkers and supervisors have been the focus of study (Kessler & Greene, 1999). One study of competencies achieved by Title IV-E MSW graduates found that they scored higher

than employees with other degrees on objective tests of child welfare–related knowledge (Bagdasaryan, 2012).

The challenge to social work programs at the MSW and BSW levels appears to be related to the ability to identify and recruit students who identify with the mission of child welfare, the quality of the educational program, the ability to align competencies in the social work curriculum with the skills needed on the job, and the opportunity for students to have a field experience that helps them develop a realistic expectation of the job.

## NATIONAL CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE INSTITUTE TRAINEESHIP PROGRAM

The purpose of the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) Traineeships program is to support professional education for current or prospective child welfare practitioners in accredited BSW or MSW programs. A major goal for the traineeship program was to develop educational experiences that would teach and reinforce core competencies in areas of child welfare practice and leadership. Trainees were expected to participate in a field placement at a child welfare agency, enroll in relevant courses to prepare for professional service and leadership in child welfare, and work in a child welfare agency on graduation. Traineeship schools were expected to innovate and improve their child welfare curricular offerings and were encouraged to provide additional supports for trainees to support completion of degrees and retention in the field. The traineeship programs also needed to be particularly attentive to addressing diversity within the workforce, local agency workforce needs, preparing future leaders, and understanding systems of care principles.

Twelve traineeships were funded: five BSW, three joint BSW/MSW, and four MSW programs. The need for a diverse workforce of the future was addressed by five programs that served Native Americans, two that focused on Hispanic students serving the Latino/a population, and two that were particularly attentive to recruiting African American students to serve the African American community. Of the 12, four served primarily rural areas and four served major urban cities. This article reports on one MSW program that centered its activities on ensuring that graduates had acquired child welfare competencies and on one BSW program that specifically recruited African American students. Both programs employed unique innovations in their curriculum or field experiences to facilitate the achievement of child welfare competencies.

## MSW CURRICULUM INNOVATION—JANE ADDAMS COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

### Rationale for the Innovation

In Illinois nearly 80% of foster care services are provided by private agencies that have been awarded contracts to provide child welfare services. These agencies have historically been challenged by chronic workforce and hiring needs that can significantly affect outcomes for children and families. For example, in fiscal year 2008 when the NCWWI initiative began, 34% of private child welfare agencies reported turnover rates greater than 30%, with an additional

37% of agencies reporting turnover rates between 20% and 29% (Child Care Association of Illinois, 2008).

In addition to this challenge, which is common to many child welfare agencies, Illinois' Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has faced additional challenges that are unique to this system. Over the past 2 decades, DCFS has undergone significant reforms that dramatically reduced the number of children in foster care. Between 1985 and 1997, the number of children in care rose from about 14,000 to a peak of 51,000. Since that time, numerous policy and program changes resulted in the reduction of children in care to a little more than 15,000 in 2010 (Rolock, Gleeson, Leathers, Dettlaff, & Jantz, 2011). Yet despite these improvements, Illinois has since been faced with multiple challenges to achieving timely permanency for those youths who remain in care, as they represent an increasingly older population with complex developmental, behavioral, and mental health needs. These challenges were reflected in the findings from Illinois' Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), which indicated "a lack of consistency with respect to efforts to ensure placement stability for children in foster care, establish permanency goals in a timely manner, and achieve permanency for children in a timely manner" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2004).

The Jane Addams Child Welfare Traineeship Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) sought to address the need for competent child welfare practitioners who are trained to provide services to children and families in Illinois with an emphasis on providing services to children in foster care and improving permanency outcomes. The traineeship was designed to provide financial assistance to select students in the final year of their MSW program who are enrolled in the Child and Family Concentration and committed to a career in child welfare. The selected students were provided with an educational program to increase their knowledge and skills of core child welfare competencies identified by DCFS to prepare them to meet the unique needs of children and families in Illinois who become involved with this system.

Students who expressed interest in the program completed an application that included an essay on the student's interest in a commitment to child welfare as a career. These applications were reviewed by an advisory board that consisted of university partners, child welfare agency staff, and community members. Advisory board members rated each application and recommended a subset of applicants to participate in individual interviews with advisory board members. During these interviews, applicants were asked to discuss their commitment to child welfare as well as their understanding of the challenges of child welfare practice, their commitment to family preservation, and their career goals in child welfare. Final selections for admission into the traineeship program were made by the advisory board members.

This traineeship program featured a collaboration between the UIC Jane Addams College of Social Work and DCFS, whereby the educational program incorporated all the curriculum material from DCFS's foundation caseworker training. This DCFS foundation training prepares students to take the Child Welfare Employee License (CWEL) examination, which is required to practice as a direct child welfare services employee in Illinois. Completion of the UIC traineeship program fulfills the training requirement for students who accept employment from DCFS or contracted private agencies following graduation. Thus, upon receiving employment in a child welfare agency, graduates of this program are exempt from participation in the DCFS foundation training and are immediately able to begin direct practice with children and families.

## Illinois Child Welfare Competencies

In 2000 the Illinois legislature passed a law requiring all individuals who work in the capacity of a direct child welfare services employee to be licensed by DCFS to provide those services. The law, which went into effect on January 1, 2001, specifies the licensing standards of child welfare employees, including the qualifications, education, training, and examination requirements (Illinois General Assembly, 2000). The license is issued by DCFS and is required for every employee of DCFS or private child welfare agencies “who carries cases, conducts child protective investigations, casework, intact/family preservation, permanency or makes licensing decisions or anyone who is a direct supervisor of any of the above employees” (Illinois General Assembly, 2000, Section 412.20). The law required DCFS to provide a licensing examination that covered “knowledge and skills including, but not limited to, understanding of child welfare laws and regulations applicable in Illinois, methods of protecting the safety and well-being of children, and the importance of and techniques for coordination of services” (Illinois General Assembly, 2000, Section 412.40). The law further required DCFS to develop training to prepare candidates for licensure.

Following the passage of this requirement, job competencies were developed for all levels of child welfare staff, including child protection specialists, intake caseworkers, placement/permanency caseworkers, and managers and supervisors. The development of competencies was led by the DCFS Office of Professional Development in collaboration with child welfare staff at all levels across the state. Subsequently, curricula for child protection specialists, intake caseworkers, placement/permanency caseworkers, and managers and supervisors were built around these competencies and used in the training of all child welfare staff to prepare them for the CWEL examination.

Child welfare competencies for permanency/placement caseworkers consist of 206 job competencies associated with the following categories: ethics, professionalism, and cultural competence ( $n = 15$ ), intake and determination of eligibility for department services ( $n = 48$ ), case assignment/engagement with clients ( $n = 26$ ), assessment ( $n = 40$ ), permanency planning through case management and intervention ( $n = 20$ ), permanency planning through case review and evaluation of progress ( $n = 25$ ), supervision and professional development ( $n = 13$ ), and court and legal preparation and participation ( $n = 19$ ). Where applicable, each competency references associated rules and procedures, accreditation standards from the Commission on Accreditation, items from the Office of the Inspector General, and federal CFRs. Each competency is then assigned a Level of Competency according to the following scale: Level 1 = *demonstrate awareness of job task*, Level 2 = *demonstrate knowledge required to perform the job task*, Level 3 = *demonstrate ability to perform the job task*, and Level 4 = *demonstrate skill in performing the job task*. Separate levels are assigned according to the level that should be demonstrated at the conclusion of the Foundations Training Course and after 1 year on the job. Achievement of these competencies at the completion of the Foundations Training Course is assessed through the CWEL examination.

## Description of the Innovation

For the Jane Addams Child Welfare Traineeship Program to be successful in preparing students for the CWEL examination, it had to sufficiently replicate the training experience that all new

DCFS employees receive, while also maintaining all required aspects of the MSW curriculum. At the time the program was developed, the DCFS foundations placement curriculum consisted of 26 modules that were delivered over the course of 4 weeks, plus 1 week of on-the-job training. Thus, the training included 160 hours of classroom-based and online instruction plus 40 hours of on-the-job training. To fully integrate this training experience into the final year of the MSW program, the following curricular enhancements were developed.

*Course work.* Trainees enrolled in a specialized course titled Advanced Child Welfare Practice, which was developed in collaboration between the university partners and the child welfare agency and meets the requirement of one elective course. This course was built around the DCFS competencies for placement/permanency caseworkers and incorporates much of the content areas included in the DCFS placement/permanency curriculum. In addition to this course that specifically addressed the DCFS child welfare competencies, university partners met with the DCFS Office of Professional Development to review the other courses required as part of the Child and Family Concentration and made revisions to these courses to ensure that they sufficiently addressed current issues faced by children and families in Illinois.

*Specialized field units.* Because the DCFS foundations training includes practical application of covered content as well as 40 hours of on-the-job training, specialized field units were developed to provide these experiences for trainees in child welfare settings. Over the course of the final year of their MSW program, trainees completed their field placements (900 hours) in one of four child welfare agencies that agreed to provide intensive training and transfer of learning opportunities associated with the placement/permanency competencies. These agencies were selected in consultation with the child welfare agency and included DCFS and three private child welfare agencies—ChildServ, Jane Addams Hull House Association, and Children’s Home and Aid. For each week of the fall semester, while students were enrolled in the Advanced Child Welfare Practice course, trainees were assigned a specific set of objectives associated with the placement/permanency competencies that were to be met in their field agencies. Field instructors documented that the students achieved these objectives each week.

*Integrative seminar.* Trainees participated in an Integrative Seminar on Child Welfare Practice, a noncredit, ungraded seminar held 10 times during the academic year. The seminar was designed to facilitate students’ integration of their field and classroom experiences and provide opportunities to present and discuss cases from their field placements. The integrative seminar also provided information on current DCFS initiatives that were designed to address priority areas identified by DCFS, including systems of care, trauma-informed practice, building protective factors, and addressing the overrepresentation of children of color. The integrative seminar was led by a dedicated field liaison who also visited each field unit twice per semester. Child welfare agency staff and other community partners regularly participated in integrative seminar sessions to discuss the strengths and challenges associated with child welfare practice in Illinois.

*Child welfare employee license examination.* At the conclusion of the fall semester, trainees were administered the CWEL examination. This is the same examination that is administered to all new child welfare employees in Illinois following completion of the foundation training requirements, as specified in Illinois statute. This exam is developed by DCFS and based on the required child welfare competencies. DCFS receives a full statistical

evaluation of this exam annually from another university partner. This evaluation includes an assessment of each test item for overall effectiveness and an evaluation of possible test item bias specifically for gender, education level, ethnicity, language, and age. The goal of the ongoing data analyses is to ensure statistically stable, reliable, and valid test items for the exam. The exam consists of 150 questions, 75 of which specifically address risk and safety assessment, while the other 75 questions address topics specific to child welfare policies and procedures in Illinois. The required passing score is 70%. The DCFS rule associated with this exam specifies that all applicants for the license are allowed two initial attempts, after which the exam can only be administered once annually from the last failure date. Following passage of this examination, students continued in their field units in the spring semester, where they continued to develop and practice their skills.

### Evidence of Effectiveness

The primary indicator that served as evidence of the effectiveness of this training program was a passing score on the CWEL examination, as this examination was specifically developed to demonstrate achievement of the DCFS child welfare competencies. Over the course of the 5 years of this program, 39 of 40 students enrolled in the program passed the examination on their first attempt, and the remaining student passed on the second attempt. The average passing score across the 5 years was 83%.

Data collected through the national evaluation conducted by the Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver (Leake et.al., 2012) also indicated that students demonstrated increases in child welfare competencies over the course of the training program. These competencies were developed by the evaluation team and represent a variety of competency domains including client engagement, interviewing skills, working with families, culturally responsive practice, safety assessment, decision-making skills, permanency planning, and others. Students provided a self-assessment of their competence in these areas at the beginning of the training program and again at the conclusion of the training program. Results of this evaluation indicated that UIC students demonstrated significant increases in their self-reported competence from the baseline survey to the follow-up survey.

In addition to these indicators, qualitative data were collected from each student upon completion of the program to gather their feedback on the program as well as recommendations for improvement. Feedback was very positive, with graduates indicating they felt very prepared to begin their careers in child welfare as a result of participation in the training program. One student stated, "I feel more prepared than my peers who didn't go through a traineeship like this to begin practicing as a social worker in child welfare." Other students echoed this sentiment, largely stating that the training program provided them with the knowledge and skills they need for child welfare practice as well as prepared them for the realities of the job and how to manage the stress and workload demands typically associated with careers in this field. Recommendations for improvement primarily focused on additional content areas to be included as part of the training program that reflect current and emerging issues in child welfare practice. These included increased content on immigrant families, including a greater understanding of immigration policies and how they may affect child welfare involvement and services, and best practices for responding to the needs of youths who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Students also requested additional assistance in job-finding skills including

résumé preparation, interviewing skills, and questions to ask during an interview to determine the best fit for their interests and skills.

## BSW CURRICULUM INNOVATION—CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

### Rationale for the Innovation

No other field of social work practice is more influenced by its context than child welfare. Laird and Hartman (1985) defined *child welfare* as the “constellation of public provisions and professional processes which are created to meet the needs of children who have not ‘fared well’” (pp. 4–5). The 21st-century BSW social work program cannot adequately train entry-level practitioners if they are not grounded in understanding the role of policy making, program development, and direct practice services to the most vulnerable families and children. One possible way to prepare the 21st-century child welfare practitioner is through a child welfare rotational internship.

In 2000 Tracy and Pine (2000) emphasized that professional practice in child welfare is primarily agency based, conducted in public agencies whose legislative mandate is to serve dependent and neglected children, and in private, nonprofit agencies that provide contracted services to these children and their families. As of today, that trend has not changed. Social workers in these agencies are professionally trained and provide services in programs that range from child protection to out-of-home care, from adoption to adolescent support. They may work at any level in the agency, from director to supervisor to direct service provider.

Today’s child welfare practitioners who aspire to management roles need skills for involving staff in making agency decisions and evaluating programs, and staff need skills in working effectively on cross-agency task forces and collaborative projects. As a result of these trends, schools and agencies must work together to prepare agency staff for professional practice and to recruit newly trained professionals into child welfare. One way to enhance entry-level social work practitioner’s readiness for working in the field of child welfare is the implementation of a rotational internship experience at the BSW level. Rotational internships enable interns to experience and learn about more than one role in a business; either an interdepartmental rotational internship or an intra-agency internship will expose students to an even more diverse range of roles and responsibilities in the field of child welfare. In addition, interns will have an opportunity to assess their skills and interest in a number of positions and can then target full-time openings that are the best fit.

### Program Overview

The mission of the Clark Atlanta University (CAU) Whitney M. Young, Jr. Baccalaureate Social Work Program is to provide a quality undergraduate education to prepare beginning entry-level social work generalist practitioners with a broad range of knowledge and skills to advocate on behalf of culturally diverse, at-risk populations in a global setting.

The curriculum enhances core social work values and ethics, ethnic and cultural diversity, and social and economic justice for at-risk populations. The BSW curriculum includes two courses specifically linked to child welfare issues: Child Welfare Programs and Services and Child

Welfare: Abuse and Neglect, which enhances the student's child welfare knowledge. The School of Social Work trains its graduates to engage in solutions to the problems of oppression and to become advocates for social change and justice, especially as it affects the livelihood of children and families.

The NCWWI project at the CAU BSW program was designed to prepare project participants for employment in public child welfare practice and to strengthen the capacity of future child welfare employees to develop greater proficiency in child welfare competencies.

### Project Goals and Objectives

The CAU BSW program developed a field rotation component of its field practicum experience to bridge the knowledge that BSW students gained from their eclectic knowledge base combined with child welfare policy and practice knowledge and skills. The project's primary goals are to increase the participant's competencies in understanding the policies related to child welfare, research skills, interpersonal skills, and insights into the child welfare system related to building systems of care, workplace management, and culturally appropriate interventions; develop an educated and stable workforce committed to the field of child welfare; and strengthen university-agency partnerships. These goals are aligned with the CSWE (2008) EPAS and embody the 10 competencies of social work education and the 41 recommended practice behaviors.

### Description of the Innovation

The following provides a summary and overview of CAU's Next Generation Child Welfare Workforce Traineeship (NGCWT). The project accepted eight students in Year 1 through Year 4 (Cohorts 1–4). Because of budget constraints the last year of the project (Year 5), four students were selected to participate in the project (Cohort 5). A total of 36 students were accepted into the program over the life of the project. During the spring semester of the junior year, interested applicants completed an application with a two- to three-page essay and were interviewed by representatives from each of the three agencies. Applicants were evaluated on their essay and their interview with the selection team. Selections and notifications were made prior to the end of the spring semester.

The CAU BSW program field practicum requires 400 hours in the field setting. The practicum experience provides opportunities for the baccalaureate student to understand the nature of the practice profession of social work and the relationship of the requisite knowledge and value bases from other foundation areas of the curriculum. In addition to the program's academic senior curriculum and field placement requirements, the NGCWT was designed to enhance students' knowledge and expectations of working in child welfare.

Participants in the NGCWT were assigned to field placements with the DFCS and two other child welfare contractors for a 28-week practicum over two semesters. The practicum focused on understanding policies and best practices during a rotation among three agencies. The participants served 6 weeks in a federal policy setting (Administration of Children and Families Children's Bureau), 6 weeks in a private child welfare agency (Families First or Lutheran Services) and 16 weeks in the local state DFCS office. Four scholars rotated through DFCS during the fall and the spring semesters. The remaining scholars spent 6–7 weeks each between the private and the federal agencies.

The NGCWT participants attended monthly 2-hour colloquiums and completed a group project in the spring semester to demonstrate their increased knowledge and skills to become competent child welfare workers. Colloquium topics included the CFSR and systems of care overview, CFSR safety outcomes and systems of care application, CFSR permanency, and CFSR well-being. Participants were introduced to the CFSR Outcome, Process and Final Report of 2007 for Georgia. Each month the colloquiums focused on a specific CFSR outcome to ensure that participants had a full understanding of the standards of the child welfare field. The program incorporated the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement's CFSR Training Package into the monthly colloquium, specifically, the modules related to the lessons learned and successful assessment to build participants' understanding of the importance of workforce management and the role of the caseworker on the overall success of the child welfare system.

The CAU NGCWT group project provided opportunities for the trainees to actively engage in synthesizing their experiences by addressing a gap in services and present their solution to a body of experts from the three agencies. The trainees self-selected their teams and developed their projects for presentation the first week of May each year of the project. The group projects were presented to the NGCWT agency representatives and the BSW faculty members. Each project was evaluated, and the winning team was announced at the annual presentation.

On the federal level, students were actively engaged in reviewing and auditing select state-level performance improvement plans in Region IV. During their placement at a private non-profit agency students were exposed to assessing the implementation of policies and observing the practices in the day-to-day operations on group home operations. While at DFCS, the students actively engaged in a more diverse practicum experience that included working closely with a supervisor in independent living, adoption/foster care, and family preservation programs. Students were assigned one supervisor and followed at least two cases during the 16 weeks they were assigned to the agency.

In the last year of the project, the four students were split into two groups. Two were assigned to DFCS, and the remaining two spent 6–7 weeks between a nonprofit and the federal agency. This unique rotational field experience provided participants with exposure to the child welfare system at the federal level and local community levels, and contributed to their acquisition of an important range of skills.

The two CAU NGCWT principal investigators worked closely with the agency field supervisors and were the field liaisons to the project agencies. Each semester the agency NGCWT field supervisors were invited to meet with the principal investigators and discuss aspects of the project aligned with the project goals and student learning outcomes. In addition, the NGCWT field supervisors also participated in the Whitney M. Young, Jr., School of Social Work Continuing Education Seminars for CEU credit, as part of the Georgia Schools of Social Work Field Education Collaborative. Five seminars/workshops are offered over the course of each academic year.

At the end of each academic year, the NGCWT trainees and the field practicum supervisors completed an evaluation of their participation in the project. The trainees also participated in the NCWWI evaluation.

### Evidence of Effectiveness

The primary indicator that served as evidence of the effectiveness of this training program was the percentage of students employed in child welfare at the end of the project. As of August

2014, 69% of the CAU NGCWT scholars are currently employed in child welfare. This is a representation of Cohorts 1, 2, 3, and 4. Cohort 5 scholars are currently in graduate school or seeking employment in their home states.

Data collected through the national evaluation conducted by the Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver on behalf of NCWWI explored general program satisfaction, field satisfaction, and competency gains among all NCWWI participants. The Butler Institute data indicated that the CAU NGCWT trainees scored significantly higher than all other BSW students in the NCWWI sample on general program satisfaction, instructional content, and program instructors. There were no significant differences between the CAU students and all other BSW groups in the NCWWI project.

Similar results were presented on field satisfaction variables. The CAU NGCWT trainees scored significantly higher than all other NCWWI BSW student participants on placement fit, faculty field liaisons, and field instructors. The field satisfaction difference between the CAU trainees and all other BSW groups was nearly significant. The data gathered on competency gains indicated that the CAU NGCWT BSW trainees' competency gains significantly increased from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. In addition, it was noted that the students reported significantly higher gains in child welfare competency means at baseline (beginning of the year) and at the annual (end of the year),  $t(116) = 2.89, p = .005$ .

Qualitative results support these findings. At the end of each academic year, traineeship students were asked to provide qualitative data regarding their experience in the program. All but one student reported that their experience at the federal level provided them with greater insight to the importance of the policies and procedures stressed at the public and nonprofit agencies. As one said, it provided them with the "big picture." In addition, several indicated they felt more prepared to do the expected work to make a difference in the lives of children and families.

## Summary

The CAU NGCWT effectively engaged students to become child welfare workers. The results of this project provided the CAU BSW program with a means to enhance the NGCWT trainee's child welfare knowledge and skills, bridging theory and practice. As the program administrators continue to reflect on the current curriculum and prepare for future trends, the program's goals will be broadened to assess all student's knowledge of policies and best practices, assist all students in making the transition from the academy to the workforce, and provide all students with a platform to cultivate interpersonal, research, and evaluation skills. Overall, the NGCWT trainees seemed to benefit from combining policy and practice knowledge and skills, thus becoming more effective social work practitioners and, in particular, child welfare practitioners. The CAU BSW program's overall emphasis on social justice for at-risk populations seems to be best practiced by introducing students to the real-life practice skills of seeing policy in action and seeing how policy shapes practice. The CAU model clearly demonstrated that the students gained much from the three-rotation model and were able to identify how gaps in their practice knowledge and skills were influenced by the flow of policy from the federal to the state to the region level of practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

The MSW curriculum innovation and the BSW field innovation resulted in the effective preparation of social work students for child welfare practice. The Illinois initiative reflects a successful attempt to integrate graduate social work competencies that are consistent with CSWE (2008) EPAS standards and the competencies needed to work in public child welfare. Especially noteworthy is the fact that the students in the MSW program were new to child welfare and could enter the field without the need for time-consuming preservice training, while the agency was able to hire staff ready to hit the ground running. Evaluation findings suggest that not only were the students successfully ready for the Illinois child welfare system but also showed significant improvement in general competencies from the beginning to the end of their participation in the traineeship program.

The BSW innovation introduced students to child welfare practice at the federal, state, and local level through its field rotation model and was successful in preparing BSW students who scored significantly higher than all other BSW students in the traineeship programs on two program satisfaction variables (general program satisfaction and instructional content). In addition, and perhaps most critically, CAU students scored significantly higher than all other BSW students on two field satisfaction variables (field placement fit and field instructors). An important caveat is that CAU students, in comparison to all other BSW students, reported significantly higher child welfare competency means at baseline.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

One of the limitations of the evaluation study in both programs is the reliance on student self-reporting. Although students at each university were compared with a cohort of similar students in NCWWI traineeships across the country, biases inherent in self-reporting, lacking any other measure, weakens the reliability. In addition, there may be a self-selection bias in those completing the evaluation instruments, but we do not know.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

There is growing evidence that child welfare staff members with either a BSW or MSW are better prepared and stay longer than other staff and some beginning evidence that these staff members are better able to influence their agencies to adopt best practices. The social work program innovations described here reflect promising new directions for social work education. A plethora of state and municipal child welfare competencies has emerged over the past few decades as child welfare agencies have struggled to ensure that staffs have the skill set needed in child welfare practice. Agencies have been joined recently by social work education in this struggle as schools seek to demonstrate that the outcome of education is the ability to demonstrate the acquisition of practice elements and skills necessary for the workplace. The Illinois innovation presents a significant advance in linking specific state-developed child welfare competencies with graduate course work, resulting in benefits to the student, who is able to begin work immediately, and to agencies, which have staff already prepared for the field.

One limitation to the transferability of this intervention is the requirement for an agreement between a public child welfare agency and a school of social work stipulating that a course designed in the same manner as the Illinois program could be a substitute for the in-service training required of a new employee. The advantage of such an arrangement means that the public child welfare agency would have a potential staff ready to go after graduation. The difficulty may be that negotiations could be lengthy and involve a number of stakeholders before an agreement could be reached.

Another challenge to transferability of this model is the time that must be devoted to implementing and monitoring the program. Through NCWWI funding, the Jane Addams program hired a half-time program coordinator to oversee the day-to-day operations of the program, serve as the field liaison to the students, and lead the integrative seminar. Without funding for this position, these responsibilities fall to existing faculty and staff, which creates workload challenges. To be successful, arrangements need to be made in the social work program to ensure that a training model such as this has adequate support and that adjustments are made to other workload responsibilities.

The field rotation model developed at CAU may portend an important direction for field education. While it is labor intensive to establish and administer, the rotation provides a unique entry to the child welfare field. Acquainting students with policy practice at the federal and state level while exposing them to direct practice at the agency level resulted in BSW students who excelled in the acquisition of child welfare competencies as compared to other students in the NCWWI BSW traineeship program. This exposure at the BSW level may be extremely important for the student who is most likely to begin at the direct practice level but will bring to that work experience and understanding of the larger policy and program dynamics that affect practice on the ground.

Geography is a limitation of the transferability of this field model. CAU, and therefore its students, is situated within a reasonable distance from the regional federal office, the state office, and nonprofit child welfare agencies. Many schools of social work may not have the capacity to provide this breadth of exposure to federal policy making, state implementation and agency direct practice.

The need for follow-up research remains. While these results are promising, further study is needed to assess whether these innovations stand the test of time. Particularly important are follow-up studies with students who graduate from social work programs to assess if their commitment to child welfare that brought them to the field in the first place can sustain them in their transition to work in public and private child welfare agencies.

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