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## Social work education in the United States: beyond boundaries

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Today in the United States of America, social work education at the baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral levels enjoys high demand, while continuously evolving in response to its environment and the changing context of professional practice. This chapter explores the salient features that propel American social work education towards excellence. These include the Council on Social Work Education's Educational Philosophy and Educational Standards (EPAS); the credentials and scholarship of the faculty who craft the programs and curricula; accreditation standards that address global awareness; the values and ethics of the profession; and economic and social justice through a lens of cultural competency. Contemporary issues in American higher education also are identified to illustrate social work education's responses to evolving trends in university teaching.

With an explosive demand for social workers for service in health care, mental health, social services, and other areas, the education of social workers currently enjoys a dynamic confluence of development and historical contribution. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the growth forecast for social work jobs in the US for the period 2010 to 2020 is 25%, where the anticipated growth of the national average for all professions is 14% (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014). Likewise, US social work education currently possesses among the strongest vitality, demand and discovery in its history, with over 100,000 individuals enrolled in the US for social work study in both full- and part-time study. Through development of evolving best practices techniques and the shared knowledge across disciplines, social work education is positioned for growth and impact in the future. Informed by an emphasis on ethical practices and keenly aware of concern for cultural competence, social work education in the US works towards inclusion of ideas, individuals and best practices.

In the US, social work education involves completion of degrees at the baccalaureate, master's and doctoral levels, with a strong emphasis on continuing education for practitioners, scholars and leaders of social work. Institutions of higher learning in the US typically require four years of study for the baccalaureate degree and two years of full-time or its equivalent study to fulfil the master's degree.

The baccalaureate degree is pursued by those who seek a career as a beginning professional social work practitioner. The BSW degree involves four years of full-time study or equivalent, with a multidisciplinary general education curriculum that leads to the last two years learning ethics and values, practice theories, and social welfare policy, research knowledge, and field practicum internships essential for social work practice. It is the first professional degree preparing students for generalist social work practice. The MSW requires two years of full-time study or equivalent, and equips the social worker with knowledge and skills for advanced practice in a variety of different fields of practice.

Regarding the number of US social work students for the 2012 academic year, baccalaureate enrolment is 52,789 full-time students with 7279 part-time students. For MSW graduate programs, student enrolment is 34,484 full-time and 19,351 part-time (CSWE Annual Statistics 2012). For the most recent period for which numbers are available (2012), 15,946 baccalaureate and 22,441 master's degrees were awarded (CSWE 2014).

### **Number of social work degree programs**

In conjunction with growth of social work demand, the number of social work programs has grown over the past several decades in the US. Today there are 490 accredited baccalaureate programs, which offer studies to meet the Bachelor of Social Work degree, and also, as of June 2013, there are 228 accredited social work programs that offer the Master of Social Work degree. As of October 2013, there are 19 BSW programs in candidacy status working towards initial accreditation and ten new MSW programs in candidacy status working towards initial accreditation (CSWE 2013).

For MSW studies, advanced concentrations generally are in Direct Clinical Practice, or Macro Practice. Within these concentrations there may be areas of focus that may include Gerontology, International Policy and Practice Issues, Physical, Mental and Behavioral Health, Organisational Management and Leadership, and Community Organising, Planning and Development. Professional development and the related continuing education are expectations of practicing and licensed social workers, and key elements of the network of social workers across academia and regional and local settings and communities where US social workers live and work. This open-minded exchange of ideas continues to ensure quality social work education in the US.

### **The Council on Social Work Education**

The development, implementation, and oversight of social work educational standards in the US are coordinated by a non-profit organization with the mission to validate the quality and content of social work education nationally. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in the US is an 'association of social work education programs and individuals that ensures and enhances the quality of social work education for a professional practice that promotes individual, family, and community wellbeing, and social and economic justice' as described on their website at [www.cswe.org](http://www.cswe.org). Oversight of US social work education includes graduate and undergraduate programs at both the baccalaureate and master's levels. Originating in 1952, CSWE connects social welfare agencies, individual social workers, plus educational institutions and members across the profession, for the advocacy and

advancement of sound social work education for best practices, cultural learning and advocacy and furtherance of social work education (CSWE 2014).

## Accreditation

### Commission on Accreditation (COA)

As the governing body, CSWE has oversight of the delivery of social work education to ensure quality and practice competency in the US. Within the Council on Social Work Education, there is a unit that holds the responsibility for the accreditation standards that define this competency and ensure that the educational intentions for social work meet them. The Commission on Accreditation (COA) within CSWE develops standards for accreditation, moving the conceptual aspects required within social work educational programs into standards. The Council on Social Work Education serves as the sole accreditation source for social work education in the US, and holds recognition from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Other programs recognised by CHEA include the Council on Occupational Education, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

CHEA is a liaison group designed to provide accountability and transparency for the public regarding fulfilment of the guidelines for accreditation. Thus, CHEA, which is sanctioned by the US federal government as the group that recognises CSWE as source for social work education accreditation standards, confirms completion of the standards and makes them public. A not-for-profit, self-regulating agency, CHEA maintains accreditation requirements for social work education and these then sanction CSWE's accreditation of educational programs for social work education.

These guidelines of accreditation establish standards that educational institutions fulfil for professional social work education. Periodic re-assessment of accreditation and accreditation standards generate the guidelines by which CSWE reviews how and where quality social work education is delivered. Such competence involves careful and detailed standards, which are systematically reviewed, studied and updated by the COA, which is comprised of 25 members chosen as being committed to fair and impartial standards. Most noteworthy of the standards is the focus on continuous assessment and improvement of the program and its curriculum.

### Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS)

As one critical component of its oversight of accreditation for social work education, CSWE maintains standards for accreditation, articulated in its Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). CSWE's *EPAS Handbook* articulates the components of the following standards for accreditation: program mission and goals, explicit curriculum, implicit curriculum, and assessment (CSWE 2013).

These four overarching themes within EPAS provide the framework for the detailed elements that are required for a social work education program to meet in order to gain full accreditation. An integrated curriculum design possesses each of these four areas. Program mission and goals means that the core aspects of social work's mission and values will be evident within the curriculum for each program that pursues accreditation. Integrity,

competence and scientific inquiry are among the shared goals for social work, and are included here. Explicit curriculum identifies the specific components of pedagogy, including the curriculum content that makes up foundational coursework for generalist learning related to the BSW and curriculum for advanced practice to be learned at the MSW level. The EPAS competencies detail the foundational learning and practice behaviours that each program must provide in order to reach and to maintain accreditation. Implicit curriculum, the third of the four standards within the EPAS, involves the culture for learning social work, for each of the programs that seeks accreditation. Within this standard are topics that include transparency of policymaking, commitment to diversity, availability of resources, the environment for discovery and learning, and matters that relate to the climate for social work education in the program seeking accreditation. Assessment involves the assurance that competencies are met within the education structure for each school that seeks accreditation. Review, awareness and intentional change to the curriculum, both explicit and implicit, are elements of programs that reflect effective assessment and a self-examination to attain standards. Thus, these four standards detail how programs will attain academic excellence via models of curriculum design that are both traditional and reflect emerging types of learning. In this way, the EPAS 'support[s] academic excellence by establishing thresholds for professional competence' (CSWE 2008, 1).

Considering the rigorous standards and contributions of these agencies, CSWE's Office of Social Work Accreditation (OSWA) carries out a process of accreditation that involves numerous steps and includes a benchmarking process, site visits to the educational programs, program self-review and compliance guides, and reviews by the members of the Commission on Accreditation.

### **Social work core competencies**

Colleges and universities that offer social work education and degrees utilise competency-based learning for development of the explicit and implicit curriculum that prepares students for either BSW and MSW practice. With competency-based learning, the focus is on the knowledge, values and skills required for either generalist or advanced social work practice.

To master the skills needed for social work practice, the BSW programs equip students for generalist practice, and the MSW programs produce advanced practitioners. Related directly to the prior discussion of accreditation of social work programs at US colleges, the BSW includes courses, projects and studies that relate directly to social work and issues specific to its generalist practice, social work values and ethics, and knowledge. These include the methods, approaches, communication skills, intellectual insight, and generalist knowledge required by professional social workers. At the MSW level, more sophisticated and complex skills and practice behaviours are required that include the application of research knowledge. These skills translate as core competencies that social workers at different levels must master for professional practice. Each of the ten competency areas details practice behaviours which illustrate, order and create operationalised measures for practice outcomes.

Table 14.1 EPAS ten core competencies for US social work education (CSWE 2008).

Specific competency	EPAS explanation of competency	Examples of competencies
1. Identify as a social worker and act accordingly.	Social workers serve as representatives of the profession, its mission, and its core values. They know the profession's history. Social workers commit themselves to the profession's enhancement and to their own professional conduct and growth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• advocate for client access to the services of social work</li> <li>• practice personal reflection and self-correction to assure continual professional development</li> <li>• attend to professional roles and boundaries</li> <li>• demonstrate professional demeanor in behaviour, appearance, and communication</li> <li>• engage in career-long learning</li> <li>• use supervision and consultation.</li> </ul>
2. Apply social work ethical principles in practice.	Social workers have an obligation to conduct themselves ethically and to engage in ethical decision-making. Social workers are knowledgeable about the value base of the profession, its ethical standards, and relevant law.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• recognise and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice</li> <li>• make ethical decisions by applying standards of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics and, as applicable, of the International Federation of Social Workers / International Association of Schools of Social Work Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles</li> <li>• tolerate ambiguity in resolving ethical conflicts</li> <li>• apply strategies of ethical reasoning to arrive at principled decisions.</li> </ul>
3. Apply critical thinking in making judgements.	Social workers are knowledgeable about the principles of logic, scientific inquiry, and reasoned discernment. They use critical thinking augmented by creativity and curiosity. Critical thinking also requires the synthesis and communication of relevant information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, and practise wisdom</li> <li>• analyse models of assessment, prevention, intervention, and evaluation</li> <li>• demonstrate effective oral and written communication in working with individuals, families, groups, organisations, communities, and colleagues.</li> </ul>
4. Engage diversity and difference in practice.	Social workers understand how diversity characterises and shapes the human experience and is critical to the formation of identity. The dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including age, class, colour, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• recognise the extent to which a culture's structures and values may oppress, marginalise, alienate, or create or enhance privilege and power</li> <li>• gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse groups</li> </ul>

## Global social work

- religion, sex, and sexual orientation. Social workers appreciate that, as a consequence of difference, a person's life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalisation, and alienation as well as privilege, power, and acclaim.
5. Advance human rights and social/economic justice. Each person, regardless of position in society, has basic human rights, such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Social workers recognise the global interconnections of oppression and are knowledgeable about theories of justice and strategies to promote human and civil rights. Social work incorporates social justice practices in organisations, institutions, and society to ensure that these basic human rights are distributed equitably and without prejudice.
6. Engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research. Social workers use practice experience to inform research, employ evidence-based interventions, evaluate their own practice, and use research findings to improve practice, policy, and social service delivery. Social workers comprehend quantitative and qualitative research and understand scientific and ethical approaches to building knowledge.
7. Apply knowledge of human behaviour in the social environment. Social workers are knowledgeable about human behaviour across the life course; the range of social systems in which people live; and the ways social systems promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and wellbeing. Social workers apply theories and knowledge from the liberal arts to understand biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development.
8. Engage in policy practice to advance social and economic wellbeing. Social work practitioners understand that policy affects service delivery, and they actively engage in policy practice. Social workers know the history and current structures of social policies and services; the role of policy in ser-
- recognise and communicate their understanding of the importance of difference in shaping life experiences
  - view themselves as learners and engage those with whom they work as informants.
  - understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination
  - advocate for human rights and social and economic justice
  - engage in practices that advance social and economic justice.
  - use practice experience to inform scientific inquiry
  - use research evidence to inform practice.
  - utilise conceptual frameworks to guide the processes of assessment, intervention, and evaluation
  - critique and apply knowledge to understand person and environment.
  - analyse, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance social wellbeing
  - collaborate with colleagues and clients for effective policy action.

vice delivery; and the role of practice in policy development.

9. Respond to the contexts that shape practice.

Social workers are informed, resourceful, and proactive in responding to evolving organisational, community, and societal contexts at all levels of practice. Social workers recognise that the context of practice is dynamic, and use knowledge and skill to respond proactively.

- continuously discover, appraise, and attend to changing locales, populations, scientific and technological developments, and emerging societal trends to provide relevant services
- provide leadership in promoting sustainable changes in service delivery and practice to improve the quality of social services.

10. Assess, evaluate, and intervene with individuals, families, groups, and communities.

Professional practice involves the dynamic and interactive processes of engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation at multiple levels. Social workers have the knowledge and skills to practice with individuals, families, groups, organisations, and communities. Practice knowledge includes identifying, analyzing, and implementing evidence-based interventions designed to achieve client goals; using research and technological advances; evaluating program outcomes and practice effectiveness; developing, analysing, advocating, and providing leadership for policies and services; and promoting social and economic justice.

#### Engagement

- substantively and affectively prepare for action with individuals, families, groups, organisations, and communities
- use empathy and other interpersonal skills
- develop a mutually agreed-on focus of work and desired outcomes.

#### Assessment

- collect, organise, and interpret client data
- assess client strengths and limitations
- develop mutually agreed-on intervention goals and objectives
- select appropriate intervention strategies.

#### Intervention

- initiate actions to achieve organisational goals
- implement prevention interventions that enhance client capacities
- help clients resolve problems
- negotiate, mediate, and advocate for clients
- facilitate transitions and endings.

#### Evaluation

- critically analyse, monitor, and evaluate interventions.

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### Faculty credentials and scholarship

Social work educators in the US share several key credentials, beginning with the MSW degree, with the completion and award of the doctoral degree becoming the academic expectation for university instruction of social work. Other key traits of social work educators include active publications and peer-reviewed scholarship, research on issues of theory, practice and social justice, and participating in community service. Social work educators in the US serve as innovators in thinking, social work action and leadership for their educational institution, for the local community where they reside, and in global initiatives. Faculty development and collaboration among social workers across the US

happen with research studies, data collection, scholarship, and programs that cross boundaries of university affiliation, state lines or geographical settings to allow social work practice and education to remain vital, immediate and relevant.

## **Education for social work practice**

### Field education

Field education is the critical element of learning and the signature learning format for study of social work at US universities and colleges. Field education is the direct placement of student social workers for supervised field instruction of the practice and performance of the core competencies in a professional setting that delivers social work services. The purpose is to provide real life learning experiences for the student learner in the profession to integrate theories, concepts, and skills. On site in the placement setting, social work professionals assist, guide and provide immediate oversight of the field education by communicating directly with the student, as well as with the academic liaison. According to the EPAS, a minimum of 950 hours of field education are required in graduate study, existing as 14 to 21 hours' field placement weekly. For the BSW, a minimum of 450 hours of field placement are required.

Key elements of field education are the development of social work values and ethics, critical thinking, and practice skills by the student. Field education is the means by which a student learns by firsthand practice in the work location of the demands, dilemmas, interactions and services that social work provides. Field instructors oversee the developing social worker as they perform tasks, witness ethical issues in social work and grow in judgment and professional practice skills. Field education placements are designed for hands-on experience, as the student gains in knowledge and insight and their tasks gradually grow in complexity. While the student's role, functions and duties grow at the field placement, competencies and confidence also grow in degree of complexity, responsibility, judgment and independence.

### Coursework and community involvement

Social work classes include lectures, case studies, the use of role plays, and small group projects for collaborative learning and presentations. Collaborative learning and the discussion and response to real-world problems in the classroom are used as preparation for professional challenges to come. Courses also offer extensive reading assignments, research and writing, exams, and online learning experiences. In learning practice skills or clinical roles, theory and role play are used as a format for instruction, as well as case studies. The curriculum includes evidence-based practices as a focus for study of theory, research and practice behaviours.

### Economic and social justice through cultural competency

In US social work education, a commitment to social justice and to improving the quality of life for all populations and humans is key. A recent review of the 2013 *Journal of Social Work Education* shows a range of topics including immigration issues, non-traditional and



world spirituality practices for social work, an exchange program between a US university and Ghana, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender outreach and sensitivity for policy and practice, and communication as a priority in US multinational agency settings. Social workers share a goal to end the oppression, injustice and lack of opportunities for all groups and people. They do so via outreach, education, provision of services, the democratic political processes, advocacy and by consideration and execution of programs to connect with those who have less opportunity. Increasing global issues also affect US social workers. Due to the world's recovery from international wars, a severe rise in mental health issues in the US, the Arab Spring, and the economic issues impacting quality of life, US social workers are alert to social justice principles. These give social work education the goal of providing skills to respond to need wherever in the world it exists: essential services and support to those with restricted opportunity is a critical focus for social work education. More than ever, a multidimensional society exists in the US, reflecting a portrait of race, culture, class, sexual identity, religious or spiritual interests, and ethnic backgrounds.

Social work education seeks to prepare practitioners to meet the current and the anticipated concerns of marginalised groups, communities, personal histories and peoples. Methods of engagement, activism, and techniques for effective outreach, sensitive and culturally alert communication skills, inclusion, and culturally informed service delivery are among the social justice topics that US social workers practice and pursue. The concentrations that social work education offers for study of special topics reflect topics of special concern for US social welfare. These include gerontology and ageing, trauma, prevention and treatment of substance abuse issues, child and family welfare, military and veterans' issues, and advanced/clinical social work practices. Social work education seeks to heighten awareness, engage solutions, research vital alternatives, examine explanatory patterns, and intervene in progressive and helpful ways.

### **Resources of NASW and the Code of Ethics**

With membership of around 150,000 and founded in 1955, another central organization coordinating social work issues in the US on a national level is the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Among noted features and services of the NASW is their Code of Ethics, which offers a detailed design for ethical practice and values for professional social work practice. These are infused in the EPAS and are embedded in the BSW and MSW programs in the US.

The National Association of Social Work also supports and emphasises the importance of social justice, social work education, professional development, cultural engagement and sharing within and beyond social work, and service. The NASW publishes reference works, guides to professional standards and thematic concerns plus the aforementioned Code of Ethics and these may be accessed at the organisation's website at [www.socialworkers.org](http://www.socialworkers.org).

### **Contemporary issues in US social work education**

Dynamic response to current and upcoming topics in the field is an important component of social work education in the US. Thus awareness of the contemporary issues that affect

social work students and their learning is crucial. These topics represent evolving trends related to US social work education. Financing a US social work education, social work licensure for US practice, global initiatives, the doctoral degree for social work, and distance learning are issues that represent concern, potential change, and close consideration by the US social work profession.

## **Tuition**

The cost of social work study in the US varies and is determined largely by the university where the student enrolls. A glimpse at tuition for MSW study in the US ranges from approximately \$5000 to around \$43,000 per year; often tuition and fees do not include living expenses for the student, such as room and board or transportation costs. Many universities offer scholarship programs, need-based tuition remission, or work study programs. For the BSW degree, annual costs for the period ending 2011 range from around \$8000 per year at the most affordable institution to \$32,671 for private four-year US institutions, with these figures including room and board.

Costs for social work higher education in the US are growing at a rapid pace and this is a serious concern for social work educational leaders and the social work profession. From 2000 to the current academic year, costs for undergraduate education in the US rose 42%, vastly higher than cost of living or income grew. CSWE reports that the median amount of loans, called student debt, for 2012–13 for US social work learners is \$25,840 total borrowed to finance a baccalaureate degree. The median amount borrowed for MSW degree costs equals \$36,337 (CSWE 2012/13 Annual Report).

## **Licensure and the Association of Social Work Boards**

Independent of social work education, yet a logical and critical indirect link, is the licensure process for practitioners of social work in the US. Individuals often pursue social work education in order to gain licensure as a social worker, which in the US is a separate process, distinct from higher education and the pursuit of social work education. For the US, social work licensure is coordinated through the Association of Social Work Boards ([www.aswb.org/SWLE/SWLE.asp](http://www.aswb.org/SWLE/SWLE.asp)). The ASWB manages the US standards and content for examination of all US social work licensure within a central repository based upon individual states' exam content and cultural competencies.

Following completion and official verification of fulfilment of all educational standards and after the awarding of the relevant degree, BSW or MSW, a student may wish or need to seek licensure to practice. In many US states, an individual may not refer to themselves as a 'social worker' unless they hold the certification of that state's health professional licensure. Individual states have different eligibility for licensure, so a social worker interested in licensure would contact the state where that person resides. Commonly, licensure is offered at varying levels such as Graduate, Generalist, or Clinical social worker licensure, depending upon the university degree fulfilled, the level of field or professional experience, and the verified US professional social work supervision. Almost every state maintains a website outlining licensure types for all professions, including social work, via the Social

Work Board of Examiners for that state. These individual websites detail the requirements, fees, and timeline for earning licensure.

The implications of licensure requirements for social work students involve the added obligations, fees and requirements for state license. These regulations are embraced by social workers in the sense that they validate and make official the social work field, but licensure can involve time, registration and waiting periods for exams, and qualifying tasks that sometimes take years to complete. Social work education leaders in the US are vigilant regarding the need for the separate arenas of education and professional social work licensure to remain in sync, echoing the careful review of ethics, clinical procedures, diagnostic guidelines and other complex areas of social work practice.

### **Global awareness evident in the EPAS**

Social work education remains aware and seeks to address through practice competencies for learning that ours is a global practice realm, and not merely a local one. The EPAS illustrate this, with emphasis for social work learning on diversity, engaging difference, human rights and socioeconomic justice. Essential human rights for all people, and outreach for those whose rights are restricted or limited, is a central theme in the EPAS, which emphasises a global perspective.

Related to CSWE's embrace of global concerns with commitment to solutions, is the Katherine A. Kendall Institute for International Social Work Education. Founded in 2004 with a commitment to outreach for international issues in social work education, the institute sponsors international conferences, research initiatives with a global scope, and promotes collaborative programs that link research and worldwide dialogues for social work learning. A world-renowned advocate for social justice and key to the development of social work education standards, Kendall was born in 1910 in Scotland and after emigration to the US at age ten later embraced the social work practice with an MSW from Louisiana State University in 1939 and a PhD from the University of Chicago in 1950 in social service administration. She served in leadership for national US social work bodies, and played a critical role in creation of the CSWE. Having served as associate director, executive director and other positions with CSWE, her passion for international unity of social work learning and for its causes governed her career. Around 1945 she was a staff member in the international office at the US Children's Bureau, and work at the United Nations (UN) followed in 1947. There, her research and writing on international social work issues led to publication of *Training for social work: an international survey*, prompting the UN passage of a resolution calling for professionalisation of social workers. The book greatly affected positive growth and development of social work education and the profession, worldwide.

From 1954 to 1963 in a voluntary role, Kendall served as Secretary of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), helping to transform this organisation from mostly European in scope to a global agency. She retired in 1978. Later, in 2004 – indicative of her passion for international learning in social work – she endowed the Katherine A. Kendall Institute of International Social Work Education, based at CSWE, for the promotion and enhancement of international understanding for social work. Numerous projects, conferences, and topics are evident within the Institute, including human

rights, global migration and disaster management. Africa, Asia, Latin America, the US and the Caribbean are sites of some of the programs of the Institute.

Citing the broadening scope and myriad issues of a multinational community, the CSWE Katherine A. Kendall Institute aims to unite resources with the heightened and related skills social workers need to practice in an internationally informed context. The primary purpose of the institute is to support social work education for global awareness of the highest standards of social work learning with an international scope. Promoting programs to nurture solutions for worldwide topics, and building of needed skills, the institute urges collaboration and exchange of global ideas for international social work gains. The institute funds collaborative efforts to globalise and connect data collection, research initiatives and programs that improve international understanding. This is merely one example of growing awareness of the need to internationalise social work education and build contacts, effective solutions and social work standards worldwide.

### **Themes and special topics for social work education**

A concern for global topics serves as a strong and ongoing issue for social work education in the US. Among the myriad issues of current research and dialogue for social work educators are found: internationalising social work education, issues of HIV-AIDS, evidence-based practices, treatment interventions and techniques for direct practice, innovations in social work learning, personal identity, communication techniques, strategies for self-care, the professional–personal balance, social policy, agency and university collaboration for community growth.

### **Doctoral education in social work**

On the horizon appears debate and discussion in the profession regarding doctoral study in the field of social work. The Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) in social work emphasises research, theory and intellectual contributions to the field, while the Doctorate in Social Work (DSW or Prof D) specialises in further study of clinical practices for social work. Different US universities offer these degrees each with unique characteristics, but a larger dialogue regarding the application of either degree to social work education remains. Some CSWE programs are discussing the implications of a change if the criteria for some federal clinical grant awards are to be awarded exclusively to DSW or clinical doctorates in social work. This beginning discussion begs clarification in the interest of committed students of social work who seek to maximise their learning and high level studies with demands of the profession and of the job market. The most recent document issued on Advanced Practice Doctorates is a report of an invitational think tank in September 2013 that addresses the question: ‘Does the marketplace want or need doctoral level social work clinicians?’ (Social Work Policy Institute 2013, 15). Some conclusions generated by the report indicate the need for further examination and wider discussion regarding the advance practice doctorate across the profession, inclusion of US federal agencies in the examination of options, and study of levels or patterns of interest in the DSW degree.

## Online education and distance learning

Distance education where social work students complete classes online towards completion of degrees is growing in popularity. The trend is for continued increase in online degrees offered for both the BSW and MSW curriculum (CSWE 2014). With students juggling work obligations and their family life, the independence and virtual access are very popular for US students of social work. For the most recent period that CSWE has numbers available, five US universities offer online study for BSW degrees. There are 25 distance learning MSW programs available, as of 17 October 2013 (CSWE Annual Report 2012–2013). Individual schools' websites detail whether courses are available to take remotely, and outline how field education is coordinated during the degree studies. Students are urged to confirm CSWE's COA accreditation status of any college where they enrol for study of social work, and to examine all requirements and fees that relate to completion of the degree.

## Conclusions

Social work education is continually evolving in the US, involving ongoing response by educators to environmental changes, social and cultural dynamics, and global issues. As shown, maintaining excellence via the highest standards for teaching and learning requires continued enhancement of programs and curricula. Priority consideration of values and ethics of the profession continues as a standard for US social work education. With vigilance for cultural competency, economic and social justice are upheld as hallmarks for US social work. Contemporary issues represent several topics of current concern and opportunity for leadership in these trends, and growth in the US social work profession.

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