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By: **Leah Hamilton, Rachel L. Wright, and Kellie Reed-Ashcraft**

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Leah Hamilton
Appalachian State University

Rachel L. Wright
Appalachian State University

Kellie Reed-Ashcraft
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Keywords: rural social work education, policy advocacy, macro practice

In recognition of the need for enhanced policy activism among social workers across practice settings, one Social Work Department in rural Appalachia launched a graduate course titled "Advanced Advocacy Practice." The course was adapted from examples on the CSWE Macro Curricular Guide and offers MSW students advanced skills in policy engagement and advocacy, with a special emphasis on the unique challenges to policy engagement when one is geographically isolated. As an advanced course, students are charged with evaluating a particular social issue, designing an advocacy project in collaboration with a local advocacy organization, and engaging in advocacy efforts with elected officials and community members. This exploratory study provides a description of the course and reports preliminary findings of course outcomes using a mixed methods approach. Self-assessed CSWE policy competencies are compared for graduating MSW students who did and did not complete the course.

Literature Review

The history of policy engagement among social workers in the United States has closely followed the ebb and flow of national political and social trends; surging in the Progressive and New Deal era, declining during the post war "anti-Communist hysteria" (Reisch, 2016, p. 263) and psychoanalytic trend, resurrecting during the Civil Rights and War on Poverty movements, only to diminish again during the 1980's and 1990's rise of Conservatism and anti-welfare sentiment (Haynes & Mickelson, 2009). Today, while there are important national trends in policy activism (Black Lives Matter, #metoo, etc.), full time policy practice among social workers remains low. In a survey of 2017 MSW graduates, only 0.1% reported that they were entering positions directly related to policy or advocacy (Salsberg et al., 2017).

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A significant determinant for policy engagement is the availability of macro content in social work programs. Two thirds of social workers running for or holding public office cite their social work education as an important preparation for their role (Lane & Humphreys, 2011) and several studies have discovered a positive relationship between macro content and policy practice after graduation (Herbert & Levin, 1996; Herbert & Mould, 1992; Lustig-Gants & Weiss-Gal, 2015). In recognition of the need for greater activism among social workers working in micro, mezzo, *and* macro settings, the Council of Social Work Education (2015) included engagement in policy practice as one of nine required competencies for accredited social work programs.

While every accredited program now contains policy coursework, only twelve American programs offer Policy Practice specializations (Council on Social Work Education, 2016). Further, in a review of literature examining "policy practice" content in social work education between the 1970s and 2014, Weiss-Gal (2016b) notes that there has been very little effort within the existent literature to systematically assess the outcomes of policy content. Only 23 of 113 relevant studies included an element of evaluation and only six used a control group design. Further, none of the American studies reviewed by Weiss-Gal (2016b) assessed the integration of CSWE policy competencies into social work education. The author concludes that there is still great need to evaluate best practices and the implementation of CSWE competencies in policy education.

While there continues to be a significant need for competent, policy engaged social workers across practice settings and communities, there are additional, unique challenges for those in rural areas. Rural communities are widely defined as areas with fewer than 50,000 people, and account for approximately 19% of the United States population (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Households in rural communities experience higher levels of poverty than urban areas, which is particularly acute among African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinx (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). In North Carolina, for instance, recent data reveal that people of color are more likely to experience negative outcomes across systems, including child welfare, education, health, and economic well-being (North Carolina Justice Center, 2017; North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics, 2010; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). These disparities may be more pronounced in rural settings due to the compounding effects of fewer services and greater structural inequalities (James et al., 2017).

Social work advocacy and policy involvement can help address these disparities. However, rural social workers may experience their own barriers to policy practice and engagement. Young adults in rural settings are more likely to live in 'civic deserts' compared to their urban counterparts. A civic desert is described as an area that lacks opportunities to participate in or learn about political involvement (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Sullivan, 2017). Recent research suggests that young people who live in a civic desert not only experience a lack of resources and decline in community cohesion but are also more likely to develop a distrust in civic life (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Sullivan, 2017).

Program Background

One social work department in the Appalachian Mountains began with an accredited Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program in 1987. In 2006, a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree was accredited. The MSW program includes two advanced concentrations, "Individuals

and Families" and "Communities and Organizations," with a "crossover design". During their concentration year, MSW students complete four courses and a concurrent field placement in their desired concentration. In addition, students select two elective courses from the *other* concentration as part of the crossover design, allowing students to complete coursework in both concentration areas.

Establishment of the MSW Program, identification of the two concentrations and the crossover design were based on a comprehensive needs assessment completed in 2001-2002 by social work faculty. Survey data were collected from BSW alumni, field supervisors, and administrators and managers from various health and human services organizations within the region. Secondary data also were collected from the National Association of Social Workers - NC Chapter, the High Country Council of Governments, the United States Census Bureau and the Department of Labor. Data from the various sources indicated the need for a regionally based MSW program. In addition, two themes emerged from qualitative survey findings regarding the specializations: the need for advanced direct practice skills with individuals and families, and the need for advanced policy, community, and administrative practice skills. Further analyses indicated the need for all future MSW graduates to possess some advanced knowledge and skills from the other specialization, since both sets of skills and knowledge were particularly needed by graduates who would serve within the northwest region of the state, which is considered primarily rural. The Community and Organizational Practice concentration includes three areas of emphasis: advanced community practice, supervisory and administrative practice, and advanced policy practice.

Advanced Advocacy Practice course description

The Advanced Advocacy Practice course was first implemented with second year and Advanced Standing MSW students in the Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 semesters. The course was adapted from a syllabus that was part of the CSWE Macro Curricular Guide (see University of Minnesota, 2018 for full syllabus) and provided an in-depth examination of social policy advocacy through exploring and evaluating a particular social issue, leading course discussion around their selected social issue, and engaging in advocacy efforts to improve the lives of vulnerable populations. Traditional policy advocacy such as meeting with elected officials during the legislative session is logistically difficult for many rural social workers and students who may be a three to four-hour drive from the state capitol. The course was structured to allow and encourage a wide range of policy advocacy activities beyond these traditional methods. Students also complete a grant application as a form of advocacy to further address the social issue under investigation.

The major project for the course involves working on a current advocacy campaign or issue relevant to students' rural communities. Students worked individually (off-campus distance education hybrid program) or in groups of three to four (on-campus face-to-face program) to select a topic of interest, identify an organization working on behalf of their issue, and develop a semester long advocacy project. Advocacy activities varied by project but included work such as facilitating letter-writing campaigns, hosting community informational sessions, bill and legislative education, and online advocacy. Students also selected two bills of interest to themselves and to the organization and followed the bills in the legislative process throughout the semester. Students

partnered with organizations addressing issues related to environmental justice, substance use and recovery, children's advocacy, LGBTQIA+ youth, criminal justice, comprehensive sex education, and homelessness.

The uniquely rural setting permeated student projects. For example, one student collected data on the experiences of the homeless population in her small town and created a report for her state legislator regarding how these experiences differ from those in urban areas. Another student group partnered with an LGBTQIA+ youth program in a neighboring rural community. Their project focused on conducting a series of educational sessions on civil rights and protections, and the creation of a media and outreach toolkit for youth to use in communicating with school boards, communities, and state legislators. Partner organizations were often not located in the same rural community as the student. Therefore, students engaged in high levels of electronic communication and virtual meetings with organization staff. Students were often the only link between state or regional-level organizations and their rural communities.

The course utilizes excerpts from Hoefer's (2015) *Advocacy Practice for Social Justice,* Haynes and Mickelson's (2009) *Affecting Change: Social Workers in the Political Arena,* and O'Neal-McElrath's (2013) *Winning Grants Step by Step: The Complete Workbook for Planning, Developing and Writing Successful Proposals*. Students are also assigned several excerpts from the University of Kansas' (n.d.) Community Tool Box. Course deliverables include a participation contract in the second week of class, a brief bill or issue paper summarizing the student's topic of interest, facilitating a class discussion on the students' policy issue, a weekly project journal, a grant proposal, a final reflection paper, and a final presentation to the class covering their project.

The class meets in a hybrid model in the distance MSW program in the Fall semesters, and as a traditional face-to-face course on the main university campus in the Spring semesters. Students in the hybrid section complete discussion forums and watch documentaries online; and meet face-to-face once per month. Online documentaries include profiles of social work pioneers such as Frances Perkins and modern activists such as the Reverend William Barber and Congresswoman Barbara Lee. Discussion forums focus upon regionally relevant social justice/policy issues such as the Charlottesville demonstrations in the fall of 2017 and the role of social workers in combating voter suppression. The in-person section is lecture and discussion based with each advocacy group facilitating a discussion on their policy advocacy issue during the semester. Both the hybrid and in-person sections include dedicated class time for workshopping the student advocacy project and grant applications. Both course sections also include several guest speakers including MSWs currently working as lobbyists, political activists, and a social worker serving as a State Representative. This pilot study aims to (1) examine differences in self-ratings of policy related competencies between graduating MSW students who completed the course and those who did not, and (2) describe student views towards policy practice at the completion of the course.

Method

We utilized a mixed methods approach to evaluate the first two years of the Advanced Advocacy Practice course. All students had completed at least one policy course in either their BSW or first year MSW studies. Approximately 30% of students in the courses were Community and Organizational Practice students, while the remaining students were enrolled in the Individuals

and Families concentration. Responses to an anonymous, voluntary likert scale survey and student final reflection papers were used to measure views towards policy practice. These methods were exempted by the Institutional Review Board in April 2018.

All graduating MSW students in Spring 2018 and Spring 2019 were invited to use a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree) to rate themselves on the following 2015 CSWE EPAs policy practice competencies:

> "Identify social policy at the local, state, and federal level that impacts wellbeing, service delivery, and access to social services."

> "Assess how social welfare and economic policies impact the delivery of and access to social services."

> "Apply critical thinking to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice."

Students were also asked to rate their agreement with the statement "Effective policy advocacy is a primary skill for all social workers, regardless of practice setting." See Appendix A for the survey instrument. Graduating MSW students not enrolled in the course were used as a comparison group. An independent samples t test was conducted for each of the survey questions via the SPSS software package.

Students in the course completed weekly journals throughout the semester to track their advocacy activity and to analyze successes and setbacks in their advocacy efforts. Final individual journal entries included an in-depth personal reflection on the process of completing the semester-long project. Reflection entries highlighted challenges, successes, and shifting views towards policy practice. In order to analyze the written reflection responses of students, we utilized thematic analysis to identify and report patterned responses into key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Final reflection journal entries were read and reread for repeated patterns in responses, and content was organized into key themes.

Results

Surveys

A total of 65 students completed the survey (44 students who completed the course and 21 students who had not).

Independent Sample T-test

Results indicate that students who completed the course rated themselves higher across the three policy competencies than graduating MSW students who had not completed the course. Students who completed the Policy Practice course reported a higher average rating of 4.11 (somewhat agree-strongly agree) for the statement "I am able to identify social policy at the local, state, and federal level that impacts well-being, service delivery, and access to social services,"

compared to an average of 3.76 (undecided-somewhat agree) for students who had not taken the course. However, an independent samples t-test did not reveal a statistically significant difference, $t(63)=1.548$, $p=0.127$, which means there is no significant difference between MSW students who completed the course and those who did not.

The experimental group reported a higher average score of 4.25 (somewhat agree-strongly agree) for the statement "I am able to assess how social welfare and economic policies impact the delivery of and access to social services," compared to 4.0 (somewhat agree) for the comparison group. However, an independent samples t-test did not reveal a statistically significant difference, $t(63)=1.243$, $p=.219$, which means there is no significant difference between MSW students who completed the course and those who did not.

The experimental group reported a higher average score of 4.23 (somewhat agree-strongly agree) for the statement "I am able to apply critical thinking to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice," compared to 4.14 (somewhat agree-strongly agree) for the comparison group. However, an independent samples t-test did not reveal a statistically significant difference, $t(63)=0.431$, $p=0.668$.

Finally, students completing the course were also more likely to see policy advocacy as a "primary skill" for social workers. They reported an average score of 4.73 for the statement "Effective policy advocacy is a primary skill for all social workers, regardless of practice setting," compared to 4.33 for the comparison group. However, an independent samples t-test suggests there was no statistically significant difference between treatment and comparison groups, $t(63)=1.829$, $p=.079$.

Reflection Responses

We identified four key themes in the final journal reflection entries that highlight knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards policy practice following the course completion. These themes are useful in understanding how students view the role of advocacy and policy practice as they prepare to enter the workforce. The themes also provide insight for areas to improve and expand in future course delivery.

Increased comfort & confidence. Most students began the course with limited exposure to and experience with policy advocacy. They describe a shift in their comfort and confidence in engaging in policy advocacy efforts:

> "I also feel that this project has been able to push me outside my comfort zone a bit as well, which I see as a positive. Sometimes, I let complacency become my excuse for inaction. Attending the [organization] group was probably the biggest way in which I stepped outside my comfort zone…I left feeling like I wanted to shout from the rooftops."

> "Progressing through the semester however, my knowledge of possible tools available to me to influence others and to truly share my opinions and point of views to the people who can put them into action skyrocketed. I was not always convinced in the past that I had the power to make change happen but I am starting to realize that I do and it does not have to

be some incredible grandstand act that makes my name famous. It can happen through the smallest of ways such as writing a letter, sending an e-mail, or making a phone call."

Linking to micro practice. The majority of students in the course were Individual & Families concentration students and would describe themselves as 'micro' social workers. Policy advocacy, and policy practice overall, is often described as a 'macro' skill. Students describe a shift by the end of the semester towards recognizing the importance of macro skills in their future micro professional roles:

"I had very little experience with macro work, and even in other macro classes I found a way to always make projects more micro to fit my mindset. One thing that I learned this semester is how intertwined macro and micro work is. It's hard to implement micro interventions when macro policies are not being passed to allow for funding, awareness, and education".

"I have come to understand that I can be a clinical social worker and a policy advocate; I am not required to choose one side and fit in a box."

"In regards to advocacy competencies, this project helped me realize that advocacy is something that all social workers, macro and micro, will partake in one way or another. In the past, I have always viewed advocacy as engaging in rallies and protests. However, I have learned that this is not the case. Advocacy comes in many forms, including advocating for clients on a micro level. I hope my newly found advocacy skills will transfer into my work in the future."

Areas for continued growth. Students described specific policy advocacy areas in need of improvement and growth as they transition into professional social workers:

"I have issues understanding policy, so this is where I need to grow throughout my career. I have learned a lot about how bills travel through the legislative system, federally and statewide, but still have much more to learn".

Challenges. Students encountered challenges in completing their collaborative advocacy projects throughout the course. These challenges appear to be related to coordinating with the agencies:

"At times, our limited cooperation from outside agencies was discouraging, but I think it was a good example that advocacy work does not always go according to plan."

"If I could go back, I would have liked to [have] been a little more assertive when it came to asking organizations to pair with us. I also wish that we had looked locally instead of at a state level."

Discussion

The findings from this descriptive pilot study suggest that completing advanced policy advocacy coursework at the MSW level may be useful in addressing the 2015 CSWE EPAs policy practice competencies. Students completing the course engaged, hands-on, with policy issues in their primarily rural communities. After completing the course, students reported higher average scores on self-assessed policy competencies compared to graduating MSW students who had not taken the course. These findings have practical implications for students as they engage in social work across the practice spectrum, and result in a greater understanding of social service delivery and the important role of policy in service provision. This may also lead to continued policy advocacy efforts among social workers in both macro and micro practice settings and should be explored further.

Data from final reflection papers reveal both strengths and weaknesses of the course in increasing policy advocacy skills, knowledge, and perceived importance. Students described greater confidence in their ability to intervene at a policy level and increased understanding of the tools and opportunities available to them to engage in a range of policy advocacy activity. A notable finding is students linking policy advocacy to micro practice, particularly among students in the Individuals and Families concentration. For these students, this may reveal an important shift in how they approach and appreciate policy advocacy activity and in expanding the role of policy advocacy beyond the 'macro' social worker arena. This might be enhanced by moving away from discussing policy advocacy and practice as a primarily macro responsibility, and towards defining it as a responsibility and expectation for all social workers.

As previously discussed, rural settings present some practical limitations in accessing services and opportunities for social work students. The course was designed to minimize these geographical limitations by encouraging students to partner with advocacy organizations located throughout the state. However, students in the course still reported some barriers when working with organizations, which may have been exacerbated by the distance between the university and many of the organizations. Future courses should address this challenge by providing additional guidance on communication. Students may also benefit from a requirement to have a secondary or backup organization identified as they begin their policy advocacy project planning.

The National Association of Social Workers (2015) recognizes the unique policy and advocacy needs within rural settings. They note that rural communities may often be negatively impacted when policies are implemented that were developed for urban settings. Increasing advocacy practice among rural social workers is therefore a critical component of civic engagement, and ultimately for addressing economic and racial disparities in disadvantaged settings. Social workers in rural settings are important assets to their communities and can help provide platforms for clients and community members to have their voices heard in powerful ways. The course described here provides an important template for adoption in other schools of social work to enhance policy advocacy skills among students and future practitioners in a variety of geographic and cultural settings. Future research or courses incorporating this model should also seek out the perspectives of community partners and members. This would aid in determining whether the needs of rural residents, community agencies, and social work students align. It would

also allow educators and researchers to better measure the impact of student policy advocacy on rural communities.

There are a number of limitations in this descriptive study. The results from both the reflection papers and surveys cannot be generalized and should be interpreted with caution. The lack of statistical significance also presents a serious limitation. A type II error may have occurred due to the small sample size. Future studies would benefit from a larger sample size. Reflective responses were not anonymous and were a part of a graded component for the course. Finally, while our non-randomized, posttest only design is vulnerable to a self-selection bias (Were students with greater policy interest/competency more likely to enroll in the class?), it is heartening that roughly 70% of the treatment group were enrolled in the program's Individuals and Families concentration.

Conclusion

Social workers are important advocates for vulnerable communities. Increasing course work around policy advocacy may increase social work student skills, knowledge, and comfort around policy advocacy activity. Possible future directions for this line of research include the comparison of various modes of macro education (i.e., hands on versus lecture based) and the long-term policy engagement of MSW students completing this course. The design of this course further included policy advocacy engagement and education with rural communities. Future studies should also evaluate the impact that increased policy advocacy practice coursework has on rural communities and potential increases in policy advocacy knowledge and engagement.

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Appendix A

1. Have you completed or are your currently enrolled in SW 5845: Advanced Policy Advocacy?

    a. Yes

    b. No

2. Please rate your current skills in the following policy competencies.

    a. I am able to identify social policy at the local, state, and federal level that impacts well-being, service delivery, and access to social services.

        i. Strongly Disagree

        ii. Somewhat Disagree

        iii. Undecided

        iv. Somewhat Agree

        v. Strongly Agree

    b. I am able to assess how social welfare and economic policies impact the delivery of and access to social services.

        i. Strongly Disagree

        ii. Somewhat Disagree

        iii. Undecided

        iv. Somewhat Agree

        v. Strongly Agree

    c. I am able to apply critical thinking to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice.

        i. Strongly Disagree

        ii. Somewhat Disagree

        iii. Undecided

      iv.   Somewhat Agree

      v.   Strongly Agree

3. Please rate your agreement with the following statement: Effective policy advocacy is a primary skill for all social workers, regardless of practice setting.

      i.   Strongly Disagree

      ii.   Somewhat Disagree

      iii.   Undecided

      iv.   Somewhat Agree

      v.   Strongly Agree