Reconsidering the Social Work Education Continuum: Social Work Education at Community Colleges in the United States

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Reconsidering the Social Work Education Continuum:
Social Work Education at Community Colleges in the United States

by

Rex J. Rempel

A Banded Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Social Work

St. Catherine University  |  University of Saint Thomas
School of Social Work

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Abstract

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) will soon revise the social work education continuum by welcoming practice doctoral programs into membership, leaving community colleges as the only excluded level of higher education in social work. The three connected products in this banded dissertation use critical pedagogy and post-positivist perspectives to explore how and why social work education evolved independently at community colleges, one of the largest, most diverse, and most affordable educational systems in the United States.

Product One employs qualitative historical research to identify the forces which led community colleges and CSWE down separate paths between 1950 and 1975, despite consideration of expansion to include associate degrees in social work. Archived records indicate that differing goals, distrust, identity issues, inattentiveness, and class differences inhibited any on-going relationship between the developing two-year college system and social work’s professional organizations.

Product Two examines the claims of some community colleges that they teach social work. It reveals the existence of Associate in Social Work (ASW) programs at 57 colleges in 24 states and then compares them to accepted standards for social work education to examine whether their programs’ offerings could be recognized as social work education. One-third of ASW program directors completed surveys. Their responses indicate voluntary adherence to 41% of select CSWE standards for Baccalaureate Social Work (BSW) programs. This quantitative, empirical research documents likenesses between some ASW programs and widely-accepted methods of social work education.
Product Three is a presentation delivered at a national conference, the Council for the Study of Community Colleges conference in April 2018, applying ideas from social work education history to the needs of community colleges generally. This presentation suggested that pathways for upward transfer depend on advocates for professional and technical education organizing their efforts, building relationships with powerful gatekeepers, publishing research, and addressing their schools’ actual and perceived weaknesses.

This banded dissertation suggests the possibilities of social work education at community colleges in the United States, belying the long-held belief in a three-level continuum of social work education. ASW programs operate in nearly half the country, and though they could have become part of CSWE, they currently operate autonomously from professional social work organizations. Stakeholders now have the opportunity to evaluate ASW programs and establish mutually beneficial relationships, if they so choose.

Keywords: CSWE, social work education, community colleges, associate degree, continuum
Dedication

This dissertation, my education, and my growth in recent years are the products of a caring community. I am incredibly grateful for the wonderful women and men of St. Thomas’/St. Kate’s DSW cohort 3; drop by drop you have filled my heart. Most importantly, I owe everything to Lenae and Sam. You made this possible. You bless me daily with your love, humor, patience, goodness, prayers, and affection. I love you. I look forward to spending more time with you and supporting you in your next endeavors.
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I appreciate the wisdom and unflagging encouragement of our faculty. Jessica Toft, you inspired a research agenda by introducing me to the Social Welfare History Archives and believing that my questions were worthy of scholarly attention. Robin Whitebird, your firm guiding hand and open ears as an advisor and mentor have been great gifts. My reviewers Rachael Richter and Jean Roberson are invaluable friends. Finally, I must recognize E. Allan Brawley as the researcher who virtually established scholarly inquiry into pre-social work studies at community colleges in the United States. My work is possible because of the foundations he built.
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Social Work Education at Community Colleges in the United States

The shape and extent of social work education in the United States was never a predetermined certainty but evolved over the past century. Economic factors, politics, historical events, and stakeholders’ personalities can alter a discipline’s direction. Subject to internal and external influences, social work education systems have varied by time and nation. Such systems are intricate ventures, the products of schools, governments, and professional organizations; they respond to community needs and student interests, to accrediting bodies and cultures. Social work education in the United States is no exception, as demonstrated by its relationship with community colleges.

Currently, social work publications, practice groups, and professional organizations alike define social work education in the United States as baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral education in preparation for professional roles (Frumpkin & Lloyd, 1995; Hoffman, 2013; Shank, 1993). Though social workers debated the appropriateness of baccalaureate social work education well into the 1980s (Brennen, 1984; Leighninger, 2000), this three-level definition has been stable and widely accepted since, with baccalaureate and masters degrees offered in the United States under the auspices of Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accreditation.

Some leaders within CSWE, however, once saw two-year colleges also as part of the continuum of social work education (CSWE, 1972; Pins, 1971). Employers and government agencies encouraged the development of pre-baccalaureate social work technicians (McPheeters & Ryan, 1971; Olson, 1966). Many community colleges declared an interest in adding social work education to their degree offerings (McPheeters & Ryan, 1971). Social Work, the official journal of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), called directly for the
integration of associate degrees into the continuum of social work education and possibly into CSWE membership (Briar, 1974).

Like social work education, the community (or junior) college system dates back to the start of the twentieth-century and expanded dramatically after 1950 (Drury, 2003). Like social work, community colleges have focused on meeting community needs, prioritizing those of the poor and other minoritized people. Community colleges today educate 41% of all college students in the nation (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2017b), often in unexpected ways. Increasingly, community colleges offer transfer degrees, attract students intent on further higher education, and develop their own baccalaureate degrees (Neault & Piland, 2014). Moreover, as many as one-fifth of American and Canadian Baccalaureate Social Work (BSW) students may start at community colleges (Coleman, Calhoun, & Rogers, 2004; Magee, 1979; Nutter & Zapf, 1990).

Some observers once believed that at least some community colleges taught social work and did so competently (Bernard, 1978; Departmental Task Force, 1965; Pins, 1971). CSWE has never admitted or accredited associate degree programs, however, and has had no formal contact with them since 1972 (Brawley, 1980). No one has shown why. In fact, since 1978 the peer-reviewed literature has been silent about social work education at community colleges in the United States other than to reference it as a bygone suggestion. This silence belies a contradiction. Dozens of community colleges currently market associate degrees under the names social work, social welfare, or pre-social work. All operate outside the purview of CSWE. These community college programs contradict the discipline’s established definition and the expectations of both social work professionals and education groups. How did these visions of social work education evolve into separate systems? Is our consensus description of social work
education flawed? Alternatively, are community colleges committing fraud? These contradictions call for exploration.

**Conceptual Framework**

A synthesis of post-positivist and critical lenses, in concert with the guiding values of social work, drove this banded dissertation. Each is a particularly appropriate lens for evaluation of education systems. All are mutually compatible.

Post-positivist worldviews posit the existence of verifiable realities, such as measurable differences in access, resources, content, academic abilities, and outcomes. This research sought fixed truths about the community colleges’ curricula, faculty, students, and efficacy. Post-positivist empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative, facilitates a structured, systematic review in pursuit of objective findings. Its deductive logic can lead to definitive conclusions while acknowledging sources of bias and limitations (Trochim, 2006).

Critical stances bring a skeptical attitude toward the status quo and its power structures. Critical pedagogy’s exemplar, theorist and activist Paulo Freire, sought explicitly to improve education as a means to build just societies, empower the disenfranchised, and lift up the poor. Freire (1970) called for *conscientization*, consciousness raising and the unequivocal recognition of contradictions. The contradiction explored here is the discrepancy between the consensus definition of social work education and the existence of Associate in Social Work programs. Overtly political, critical pedagogy affirms the reality of oppression and poses difficult questions about decision-making processes—such as those of CSWE—and their impacts. The goal is the tangible improvement of real-world institutions. While rooted in the historical realities of twentieth-century Brazil, a critical approach remains fitting for various educational systems (hooks, 1994).
Additionally, this research applied social work’s professional standards to social work education. As a profession, social work aims for partnerships with marginalized people and service to the most vulnerable members of society, for the sake of individual and community transformation. Social work ethics encourage social and political action to challenge injustices and end oppression. Social workers profess commitments to competency, diversity, equity, social justice, and appreciation for the strengths of all (NASW, 2017). Intent on improving the quality of social work education, CSWE (2015) itself embraces evaluation. Social work practice and educational standards demand that social workers assess and appraise systems and their own practices. Judging social work education by social work standards is fitting.

These lenses—post-positivism, critical pedagogy, and the standards of professional social work organizations—complement one another. Each supports research in search of truth. Post-positivism and social work trust the scientific method (CSWE, 2015; Trochim, 2016). Post-positivists and critical pedagogists embrace both qualitative and quantitative research (Ryan, 2006; Reisch, 2013). Critical pedagogy and social work alike aim to enhance the human condition, particularly that of the impoverished (CSWE, 2015; Freire, 1970). Either will name oppression when found. Both welcome social change, seeing political work as a necessity (CSWE, 2015; Freire, 1970). Both see education as a means to critical consciousness.

Two-year colleges differ significantly from traditional liberal arts colleges and research universities in their missions, faculty, curricula, and student bodies. If education should liberate the poor and address social injustices, it becomes appropriate to investigate whether social work education has aligned itself with elite institutions or upheld barriers to professional inclusion as social workers. Likewise, scholars can seek the truth as to whether community colleges have worked for their liberation or enabled their own exclusion. As seen in Product One, between
1950 and 1975 stakeholders debated whether community colleges could and should be empowered as social work educators. The upcoming expansion of CSWE (2017) to include some doctoral programs, rising tuition costs, and the discovery of ASW programs may renew that debate. I advocate for data-driven decision making, in line with social work’s mission. Such consideration of social work education in community colleges in the United States, through these linked products, represents scholarship in Boyer’s (2016) comprehensive understanding of the term: discovery, application, education, and service. Whether the results support current practices or suggest alterations, they shall expand our understanding of the practice of social work education in the United States.

**Summary of Scholarship Products**

This Banded Dissertation is composed of three scholarly products. Product One of this banded dissertation explores why the United States’ social work education system evolved as it did between 1950 and 1975. This qualitative historical research compares primary source materials in the Social Welfare History Archives with published accounts to determine why the Council on Social Work Education named baccalaureate programs, rather than associate degrees, the first level of accredited social work education. Archived materials demonstrate community colleges’ interest. CSWE, meanwhile, sponsored workshops and wrote guidelines for two-year programs. A few times its leaders spoke of a burgeoning four-level continuum, from associate to doctoral degrees. Nevertheless, neither community colleges nor CSWE made any formal efforts at partnership. By the mid-1970s both accepted futures independent of one another. Unpublished meeting summaries, personal notes, and private correspondence written by dignitaries such as Katherine Kendall, Arnulf Pins, and Alice Taylor point to CSWE’s rationale. Findings from this research indicate that suspicion of vocationalism, differences in identity, economic influences,
and distrust of unfamiliar community college systems were key factors in CSWE’s movement away from community colleges and its self-imposed limitation of accreditation to BSW and MSW programs.

The survey research presented in Product Two demonstrates the existence of social work education at community colleges in the United States, outside CSWE oversight. Research and communication with college personnel produced a catalog of 57 community colleges across the country offering Associate in Social Work (ASW) degrees, nearly two-thirds the combined number of research and practice doctoral programs. Having substantiated their existence for the first time in scholarly literature, I proceeded to inquire about their nature. One-third of ASW program directors completed an online survey. Respondents indicated meeting 41% of select objective 2015 CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) for BSW programs. ASW programs begin to resemble BSW programs in structure and intent, despite serving a different educational level and not being responsible for EPAS fulfillment. While much about these programs remains unknown, this quantitative survey data facilitates an initial scholarly examination of a heretofore invisible system of social work education.

The final component of this dissertation, Product Three, applies the findings of the first two products for educators beyond social work: researchers, faculty, and college administrators at the 60th annual conference of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges. Combining storytelling, quantitative data, archival evidence, and visual aids, this April 2018 presentation of original scholarship argued that people or institutions seeking to advance applied associate degrees of any type should attend to their relationships with four-year colleges and universities, organize for the sake of political advocacy, and publish scholarly research about the efficacy of their programs.
Discussion

I believe that this dissertation presents the first in-depth consideration of, and the first empirical research into, the relationship between social work and community colleges in at least a generation. It provides insight into the decision-making of the discipline’s accrediting body, making use of private documents and internal communication unavailable to the public at the time of events. Further, this work reveals the existence of an additional level of social work education, the Associate in Social Work, thereby demonstrating inadequacies in the consensus definition of social work education. Social work education in the United States is broader than commonly believed and unmistakably broader than CSWE’s membership.

Private correspondence, symposium notes, meeting minutes and other primary source data discovered in archived records—confirming suppositions in the secondary literature—verify that CSWE aligned itself with older, more prestigious systems in search of professional status and higher wages for social workers. New forms of social work education were explored. With support from the federal government, employers tried out new job titles and universities tested new types of training (Alman, 1965; Cox, 1963; CSWE, 1969a, 1970b; Purvine, 1970; Smith, 1958; Witte, 1963). More than 150 community colleges expressed interest in teaching social work (CSWE, 1969b; Greenberg, 1966; Kendall, 1963, Smith, 1958; Stellman, 1965). CSWE held workshops and wrote guidelines for two-year programs. Nevertheless, CSWE never appeared to consider partnerships with community colleges seriously. Except for a few years in the early 1970s, community colleges were never important to CSWE. The archival evidence reviewed in this dissertation demonstrates why this may have been the case.

Professional social work groups in the mid-to-late twentieth century focused on the protection of social work jobs and the success of already existent educational programs, more so
than on the educational barriers of the poor and minorities. To improve social status and wages, social work leaders long emphasized professionalizing its workforce (Bartlett, 1949; Kendall, 1950; Leighninger, 2000; Taylor, 1951). Improvement of the discipline would occur top-down, pushing for higher educational levels for social workers, firmly establishing graduate degrees as the norm (Bartlett, 1949; Taylor, 1951; Kendall, 1950).

Many within and outside CSWE saw it as a slow-moving organization in its first decades, resistant to change (Kendall, 2002; Shank, 1993). CSWE was careful, deliberate about expansion to include undergraduate studies. They would not rush (Gore, 1969; Kendall, 1956, 2002). Many CSWE leaders and members hoping to raise the profession’s standing resisted any undergraduate social work education, for decades (Shank, 1993). Debate over and development of BSW standards and curricula busied the organization throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Kendall, 2002; Schindler & Brawley, 1993; Shank, 1993). A relatively small organization, CSWE may have been too busy, too preoccupied with BSW programs and professional continuing education to consider even broader expansion seriously. The addition of community colleges could have required further years or decades of work.

As shown by the archival evidence, many social work leaders struggled to trust community colleges. Their lack of familiarity with community colleges’ triggered concerns (Gore, 1969; Purvine, 1970), as did technical education (CSWE, 1969a; Harper, 1951; Kendall, 1950). Some in social work questioned the quality of community college programs and their students (Gore, 1969). An assortment of stakeholders doubted the ability of paraprofessionals or anyone without an advanced degree to serve competently (Alman, 1965; Dillick, 1965; Levinson & Schiller, 1965; Riessman, 1963).
These concerns supported the perpetuation of social work’s existing cultural identity. Social work education leaders had long voiced distaste for vocational education (Austin, 1997; CSWE, 1967; Hollis & Taylor, 1951). Instead, social work education leaders emphasized the importance of a liberal arts education (Harper, 1951; Houk, 1966; Kendall, 1956, 1963), reaffirming the well-respected college systems it already knew well. Community colleges’ student populations differed greatly from those of CSWE members schools, often populated by prosperous Whites (Levinson & Schiller, 1965; Riessman, 1963). Whereas CSWE actively promoted gatekeeping (Austin, 1997; Shank, 1993; Stuart, Leighninger, & Donahue, 1993) and its member programs practiced selective admissions, community colleges welcomed all students (Brawley & Schindler, 1972), creating a non-professional, all-comers environment that differed significantly from the professional image CSWE sought to portray. Social work remained closely tied to the private, research-based, clinically-oriented, graduate social work programs which exerted decades of mid-twentieth century dominance over public, local, undergraduate, generalist education for the masses (Austin, 1997).

For all these reasons CSWE limited its twentieth-century expansion to the inclusion of baccalaureate programs. No external pressures decreed otherwise. The need to expand social work education expired with the contraction of the social work job market in the 1970s (Schindler & Brawley, 1993). Social movements towards radical democratization and societal reordering—which could have created pressure for diversification of social work education—also died away by the 1980s (Brennen, 1984). Community colleges themselves do not seem to have pushed for CSWE membership. CSWE records show no evidence of self-advocacy by community college leaders. Rather, community colleges tended to hire non-social workers to

Surviving documents suggest that few people within CSWE intended anything more towards community colleges than an advisory role (CSWE, 1969a; Kendall, 1963). Those Human Services programs would serve as a proxy for social work education at community colleges, without requiring CSWE involvement (Berg-Weger, Birkenmaier, Tebb, & Rosenthal, 1999; Brennen, 1984; Brawley, 1975, 1980, 1981, 1982; McPheeters & King, 1971; Romney, 1972). Consequently, the idea of social work education at community colleges hardly went past consideration (Brawley, 1980; Brennen, 1984; Kendall, 2002). The documents held in the Social Welfare History Archives validate—and expand upon—some of the speculations made as passing comments in previous literature, providing an evidence-base for earlier conjecture as well as new rationale for the actions and inaction between 1950 and 1975. In the end, many forces shaped the parallel evolution of ASW programs and CSWE.

Community colleges social work programs did develop in the United States, nonetheless. Dozens of ASW programs exist. They are found from Miami, Florida to Seattle, Washington, from Portland, Maine to San Diego, California. In contrast to prior claims in the literature which dismissed them outright, this new research reveals that ASW programs are common, if operating in isolation and not standardized. Student populations at community colleges offering ASW degrees range from less than 2,000 to over 30,000, with anywhere from 9% to 95% minority enrollment. The colleges range from 28 to 120 years old and charge local students from $2,000 to $8,000 for one year of full-time tuition.

Product Two of this dissertation begins an examination of such ASW programs. The majority of ASW program directors surveyed in 2018 reported meeting CSWE’s baccalaureate
standards for mission statements, defined goals, faculty education, faculty experience, faculty-student ratios, program director appointments, and assessment plans. Fewer than a third indicated meeting BSW standards for field education hours, field education director criteria, admission requirements, credit for life experience, or professional advising. Fieldwork requirements at responding ASW programs vary from none to 420 hours. While only one school indicated teaching to all nine competencies mandated by CSWE, 74% of schools said they taught to at least six of those competencies. The median ASW program self-reportedly meets 43% of the BSW EPAS standards investigated, with individual ASW programs’ adherence varying from 0% to 83%. These results suggest that many ASW programs may authentically teach social work.

These findings extend and expand prior research on social work history. They build upon the literature of the past two decades which made only vague references to community college programs without identifying whether they teach social work or merely related subjects. The studies presented in this dissertation reflect the first published scholarly investigation into why community colleges and CSWE chose not to enter into any partnerships. They show general agreement with the prior considerations of the fit between community college programs and CSWE expectations, though prior research considered community college programs operating in the 1960s and 1970s under several titles other than social work, rather than contemporary Associate in Social Work programs. Some ASW programs appear to operate significantly like CSWE-accredited schools, but their variety is great. This initial evidence presented here warrants further examination of these programs.

**Implications for Social Work Education**

Along with its reconsideration of accreditation of practice doctorates as a terminal degree in social work, the social work education system should reevaluate the beginning of its
educational continuum. *The Encyclopedia of Social Work* and other texts may be due for revision. Social work educators who acknowledge these findings may wish to reconsider their three-level definition of social work’s educational continuum based on this historical evidence. Organizations such as CSWE and NASW could publicly recognize that dozens of colleges across the United States offer Associate in Social Work degrees. The value, consistency, and character of these associate degrees remain undetermined, but their existence—and thus a larger shape for social work education—can no longer be overlooked.

Implications arise for BSW programs in particular. BSW programs in the Midwest and South, where most ASW programs are found, may benefit from forming or strengthening relationships with local ASW programs. They can facilitate upward transfer and address issues of unequal access to social work education by ensuring clear pathways for community college students, many of whom express interest in enrolling in baccalaureate studies but face systematic barriers (AACC, 2015). Doing so would be consistent with professional social work values.

Community colleges themselves have responsibilities to ensure the quality of the education they provide. Virtually all educational systems and disciplines have found benefits in professional associations. Organizing may facilitate isolated ASW programs’ assessment, identification of strengths and weaknesses, and selection of improvement strategies. Doing so could strengthen their reputation, confirm their appropriateness as preparation for BSW studies, and aid any future conversations with bodies such as the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors or the Council on Social Work Education.

Advocates for equity and increased diversity in social work education and practice can find partners in community colleges. Possibly one-quarter of community college students are immigrants or the children of immigrants (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco,
Fewer than half of community college students identify as white (AACC, 2017a). Disciplines throughout the health sciences are beginning to consider the ramifications of this. Talamantes et al. (2014), for example, discovered that about one-third of medical school students previously studied in a community college. These students were more likely than other medical students to be people of color, to be first-generation college students, and to state intentions to practice in an underserved community, and yet were less likely to gain admission (Talamantes et al., 2014). People intent on expanding the pathways to social work for members of minoritized groups may wish to consider whether attitudinal or class issues create unnecessary barriers to inclusion.

The challenges to professional and technical colleges have already been evident, including students’ barriers to upward transfer into baccalaureate programs (LaSota & Zumeta, 2016; Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2017; Neault & Piland, 2014). Their leaders can learn from this history. Nothing is given. Integration with other higher education systems requires a concerted effort, unity, organization, and self-advocacy.

Finally, individuals who are interested in social work and have yet to earn a college degree have more options than previously recognized. People wishing to begin their studies sooner, those unable to relocate to enroll in a BSW program, and those impeded by the increasing costs of higher education can pursue an Associate in Social Work degree.

**Implications for Future Research**

Critical pedagogy frameworks can enhance future research. When applied to archival evidence of social work’s challenges in the 1960s and 1970s, it uncovered evidence of an educational system’s attention to self-interest and alignment with powerful institutions. It demonstrated the isolation and exclusion of historically marginalized groups and higher
education’s least influential participants. It pointed out possible discrepancies between social work’s values and its structures. Further research can likewise enhance our awareness through the application of critical paradigms.

The research presented in this dissertation merely opens the conversation on the subject of social work education in American community colleges. Findings derived from the first interpretations of archival content should be tested for accuracy. Scholars may find other valid readings of the evidence, particularly if scrutinizing additional records of historical events.

Now that the existence of ASW programs and their resemblance to recognized social work education has been shown, it remains to explore their nature more fully. Much remains unknown about social work education at community colleges in the United States, including most aspects of its character, outcomes, and quality. As well, it is unclear why stakeholders in community colleges operated as they have. Scholars can determine the size and demographics of ASW student bodies and trends in the number of ASW programs or students. The composition of these programs is yet unknown. What do they teach? Who teaches in these programs? Who enrolls? How closely do ASW curricula resemble the first two years of BSW education or Associate in Human Services studies? Quantitative research, meanwhile, can be enhanced through qualitative studies into the experiences of ASW students and faculty members.

ASW program outcomes, in particular, may interest social work educators. What are the retention and graduation rates? What types of employment or baccalaureate programs do their graduates enter? How many are employed? What percentage continue on to baccalaureate education? Do BSW programs admit most ASW graduates? Do their graduates succeed in baccalaureate programs? What are their grades and graduation rates after upward transfer? How
do their grades compare to other baccalaureate students? How many earn a BSW or another baccalaureate degree? None of this data is currently available to the public.

Finally, many questions remain about the quality of social work education in community colleges. What are their strengths and weaknesses? Further research can clarify how well-prepared community college students are for BSW studies. Such information can facilitate consideration of more central questions, such as whether community college programs benefit social work. Some stakeholders may wish to quickly judge whether Associate in Social Work programs should be encouraged or disbanded, organized or left to operate independent of one another, accredited or disavowed. Ultimately stakeholders may need to determine whether ASW programs improve or degrade the quality and quantity of social work education, but little information is now available. The advantages and disadvantages of an earlier start to social work education remain unclear. Many strands must be added to this initial research to generate an adequate understanding of the Associate in Social Work. Social work educators and practitioners will then be equipped to consider the proper role for community colleges in social work education and the most sensible composition of the social work education continuum moving forward.

**Conclusions**

This research highlights the values and concerns of CSWE in a prior generation, as well as the consequences of its decisions. This work draws attention to differences between outsiders’ suppositions and community college programming. Throughout, it makes evident that social work education is a human process, conducted by human institutions. It proceeds from human hopes, fears, passions, prejudices, concerns, preferences, priorities, misunderstandings, intentions, and limitations. That is why ongoing evaluation of social work education is necessary,
testing not only its outcomes but also social work education’s value-adherence, in all formats and at all levels. Hopefully, this research broadens views of social work education and sparks the conceptualization of new opportunities. The discipline’s possibilities for its structure, students, content, and locale are many. It behooves social work to periodically revisit its alternatives and options, as social work education continues to evolve during its second century. There may be many ways to accomplish its invaluable goals.
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The Forgotten History of CSWE’s Shift Away from Community Colleges

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Abstract

From the 1950s to mid-1970s social work educators in the United States considered developing a multi-level continuum of social work education including associate degrees. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) added baccalaureate degree programs only. By 1979 the idea of including associate degrees in this continuum disappeared from the scholarly conversation. This qualitative historical research explores factors that led to the exclusion of community colleges from CSWE membership and prevented accreditation of associate degree programs. Using archival evidence, it synthesizes primary and secondary sources and applies a critical pedagogy framework to highlight concerns. Findings suggest that distrust, the pace of change, professionalization, BSW program development, cultural differences, resistance to change, and a lack of external pressure coalesced to rebuff recognition of community colleges as an alternate pathway for social work education in the U.S.

Keywords: CSWE, social work education, community colleges, associate degrees, history
The Forgotten History of CSWE’s Shift Away from Community Colleges

From the 1940s to the early 1970s, the United States needed far more social work labor than Master’s of Social Work (MSW) programs could produce (McPheeters & King, 1971). The juxtaposition of the want for a larger labor force with deep disagreement about undergraduate social work education fostered a period of significant uncertainty. The continuum of social work education which eventually emerged has stood for four decades but is again under reconsideration.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting body for social work education in the United States since 1952, stood in opposition to undergraduate social work education from its inception (Austin, 1997; Shank, 1993). In search of greater status—recognition, respect, and better wages—its leaders demanded the highest possible levels of education (Leighninger, 2000). Federal anti-poverty programs, however, caused a significant expansion of social service and public welfare ventures, and thus a great need for social work staff (Stuart, Leighninger, & Donahue, 1993). Service providers responded by hiring who they could, creating new roles for pre-professional technicians and paraprofessionals (Brager, 1965) while schools of social work innovated with new types of training (Brennen, 1984). Social work leaders considered both baccalaureate social work and the rapidly expanding community college system—which more than doubled during the 1960s—as opportunities for growth and workforce diversification (AACC, 2017; Council on Social Work Education, 1970a; Feldstein, 1968). In the end, CSWE chose only one: baccalaureate studies. In doing so, it set the scope of social work education in the United States for decades.

That outcome was not a foregone conclusion. CSWE’s acknowledgment of its need to expand could have led to more significant changes. Between 1962 and 1972, CSWE organized
studies, convened workshops, and wrote guidelines not only for baccalaureate programs but also for two-year government-supported colleges offering associate degrees (Brawley & Schindler, 1972), commonly known as community colleges. The National Association of Social Work (NASW), the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and the Southern Regional Education Board all encouraged partnerships with community colleges (Daly, 1967). In the early 1970s, some educators believed this change was imminent. The editors of NASW’s journal *Social Work* explicitly called on CSWE to extend membership to associate degree programs (Briar, 1974). In a publication co-produced with the American Association of Junior Colleges, CSWE (1970a) recognized that “a special need exists for the development of a corps of workers in the social services at the associate degree level” (p. 12). Two Executive Directors of CSWE and the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* stated that associate degrees in social work had become part of the continuum of social work education (Bernard, 1978; Kendall, 1977; Pins, 1971).

Though some community colleges would remain interested in offering social work education, as detailed in Product Two below, CSWE ceased action with community colleges in 1972 (Brawley, 1980), just one year after approving membership for baccalaureate programs (Sheafor, 2014). Professional groups and commenters soon deemed the idea of social work education at U.S. community colleges so doubtful that the topic virtually disappeared from the scholarly literature within a decade. Academics have researched two-year social work diplomas and related foundational degrees in other nations (Coleman, Calhoun, & Rogers, 2004; Edmond, Aranda, Gaudoin, & Law, 2012; Fenge, 2011; Hannis, 1995; Kendall, 1949, 1977; Nutter & Zapf, 1990). An extensive review of the literature revealed only seven possible references since 1979 to social work education at community colleges in the United States, however. These included three ambiguous references to social work-related programs (Clavner & Clavner, 1987;
CSWE, 2009; Messinger, 2014) and a conclusion that community colleges offered something like social work education (Brawley, 1980). The only actual references to social work education at American community colleges in the past forty years were rejections, three historical recollections of it as a since-dismissed suggestion (Brennen 1984; Frumpkin & Lloyd, 1995; Kendall, 2002).

Despite their appreciation for inclusion and diversity, social work organizations in the United States moved away from a sizable higher education system, that with the largest presence of marginalized people (AACC, 2017). This dramatic about-face calls for explanation, generating the research question: What factors led to the exclusion of community colleges from CSWE membership and prevented accreditation of associate degree programs in social work? Answering this question can clarify why the United States developed the social work education system it did and bring to light influences which may still operate today.

As detailed below, new archival research and a review of scholarly literature reveal issues with distrust, timing, resistance to change, professionalization, program titles, failures to organize, and differences in culture and class. I will argue that identity issues, including concerns about class differences, kept community colleges and CSWE apart. Participants’ words will serve as evidence of what happened and why.

Dissemination of this history allows for the refinement of social work’s narrative. Unfolding the past reveals persistent barriers to social work education, including classism. Understanding the forces which influenced social work education in the 1960s and 1970s alerts stakeholders to influences which may still be at play today. An honest examination of the past facilitates the application of a critical lens to today’s systems. Awareness of the decisions made by earlier generations facilitates recognition that current systems were not a manifest destiny, are
not the only possibility, and can be improved upon. Doing so unearths new options, such as the expansion of social work education and diversification of the workforce. Finally, the forgotten history of CSWE’s relationship with community college provides new perspectives on contemporary issues, including college affordability. Such awareness should aid deliberate decision-making as social work continues its mission to serve the poor and build a just society.

**Critical Pedagogy as an Analytic Framework**

Aiming to improve education, expand democracy, and actualize social justice for the poor and marginalized in concrete ways, critical pedagogy fits well with social work’s values (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Reisch, 2013). Critical pedagogy calls for an honest look at organizations’ choices, bringing a skeptical attitude to the status quo and its power structures (Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005). The process starts by articulating the status quo as a problem, asking what is, how it is, and why it is as such (Freire, 1970). However uncomfortable the exchange, critical pedagogy strives to unveil any structures that uphold an oppressive status quo. Doing so requires awareness of class, culture, race, or gender-based oppression and division, with particular attention to issues of class (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). The objective shall be mutually liberating new structures—solidarity and empowerment for professional people and the poor alike.

**Literature Review**

The scholarly review of social work education at community colleges in the United States is scant and speculative. Most authors considered it only in passing, without reference to one another’s claims. Few authors conveyed unambiguous assertions about factors leading CSWE away from community colleges.

Edward A. Brawley, the foremost scholar on social work-related community college programs, composed the only substantial consideration of why social work education would
occur at all levels of American higher education but one (1980). He shared convincing evidence—including statements from the White House, NASW announcements, and local licensure efforts—that the federal government’s 1970s deprofessionalization movement which questioned the need for social service providers with advanced educations led to a serious push by NASW for the legal regulation of social work practice. As the social service labor market began to contract in the 1970s, social workers found it necessary to argue publicly for the necessity of graduate education and their jobs. Brawley also surmised that gatekeeping practices and adverse reactions from MSWs working with paraprofessionals likely contributed to “a climate that is not supportive of the paraprofessional” (1980, p. 779) or associate degrees in social work.

E. Clifford Brennen (1984) saw the movement of community colleges and CSWE toward one another as a passing fancy. “Disillusionment that followed the romantic notion of the 1960s that anybody can do anything” (1984, p. 35) and the presence of community college graduates in few BSW programs left most social work educators unfamiliar with and uncertain about relevant community college programs. What really “stigmatized the AA [Associate of Arts] programs is their identification with human services” (1984, p. 35), however. Multiple observers emphasized the impact of community colleges’ decision to self-identify as Human Services programs, rather than as social work (Brawley, 1980, 1982; Brennen, 1984, CSWE 1970a). These collegiate human services programs remained ambiguous about their purpose, “not clearly identified with any single profession” (Brawley & Schindler, 1972, p. 14). Ruben Schindler and Brawley’s (1993) national survey documented 23 different program titles for human services associate degree programs.
This ambiguity of purpose may have been exemplified and exacerbated by the hire of community college faculty without social work degrees. In his 1968 CSWE-sponsored report on social welfare associate degree programs, introduced by CSWE Executive Director Arnulf Pins, Donald Feldstein alleged that “Anyone with generally accepted expertise will be considered” (p. 15) for hire as an instructor. In their 1972 survey of social service-related associate programs, Brawley and Schindler found that only 18% of program directors held MSW degrees.

Having conducted national surveys of community college programs for over two decades, initially on behalf of CSWE, Schindler and Brawley proffered a longitudinal view of the relationship between these institutions. Echoing earlier statements about the impact of deprofessionalization, they argued that NASW withdrew its support “when the social services job market tightened and concern about the declassification of social work jobs in the public sector became an issue” (1993, p. 260). CSWE, on the other hand, “became preoccupied with the emergence of the BSW, the burden of accrediting those programs, and a tightening market for their graduates” (Schindler & Brawley, 1993, p. 260). Having been the subject of a half-century of debate as to their merit and appropriateness (Shank, 1993), newly accredited BSW programs would take precedence.

Katherine Kendall, who led CSWE and the International Association of Schools of Social Work, said, “The idea was not rejected, but it became buried in the rapidly developing plans for greater recognition of baccalaureate programs” (2002, p. 198). While she staunchly maintained her preference for university and post-graduate studies of social work and resisted associate degrees in the U.S., Kendall still endorsed two-year post-secondary technical social work education in Canada, Japan, Europe, Africa, and Latin America (1949, 1977).
Brawley, Schindler, Brennen, and Kendall variously attributed the separation to attention to BSW programs, a reduction in social work jobs, responses to deprofessionalization, complaints from MSWs supervising inexperienced paraprofessionals, the end of 1960s naïveté, community colleges’ adoption of human services curricula, and the absence of community college graduates in most BSW programs. They agreed on little and presented scant evidence for their conclusions. Social work is left with suppositions, an uncertainty which drives a review of archival evidence. Why public conversation essentially stopped in 1978 is unknown. The public knows almost nothing about the beliefs, feelings, attitudes, or values that drove decision-makers within CSWE. The retrievable discussion ignored the influence of any events before 1968, CSWE’s internal differences, and interplay within community colleges. Without reliable information, educators cannot know the seriousness with which partnership was considered or why CSWE proceeded as it did. Fortunately, some evidence was preserved.

**Methods**

**Materials and Data Collection**

Consistent with critical pedagogy, this qualitative historical inquiry sought multiple narratives, exploring evidence previously overlooked by scholars. This study pursued within the written words of CSWE, NASW, and college employees any evidence of their subjective experiences, perspectives, and values. The paucity of published material on the relationship between community colleges and CSWE forced reliance on primary source materials stored in the Social Welfare History Archives: CSWE administrative and program records from inception to 1979; Baccalaureate Program Directors Association records; and the collected papers of Alice Taylor Davis, co-author of the influential 1951 study of social work education, and CSWE Director Katherine Kendall. Together these collections hold nearly a century of consultation
notes, correspondence, flyers, lists, manuscripts, meeting minutes, press releases, speeches, and studies.

This review focused in particular on the quarter-century from 1950 to 1975. Within these materials I sought references to “associate degree,” “community college,” “junior college,” “post-secondary,” “pre-professional,” “social work education,” “training,” “undergraduate,” “vocational,” and their derivatives. Pertinent documents were photographed or transcribed, with contemporaneous note-taking about their content.

Data Analysis

Critical Pedagogy supplied the analytic framework. The exploratory thematic analysis of findings followed Freire’s (1970) steps for the critical reviews of educational systems: observation of concrete facts, acknowledgment of contradictions, detection of historical trends, and classification of themes. The analysis was inductive, moving from specific words to generalizations about participants’ thoughts and feelings. The open coding of document contents facilitated pattern recognition and the declaration of themes. Each piece of evidence’s strength was rated based on the repetition of its ideas across multiple sources, clarity, proximity to decision-making, and the probability of secondary-gain for its originator.

The triangulation of evidence enhanced data integrity, consolidation, and comparison. Scholarly research, government reports, and correspondence from community colleges supplemented CSWE-generated materials. Primary source data was then compared with any available secondary sources to judge the fit of interpretation with otherwise established historical trends. Twelve education and social work databases were searched, using the same keywords sought within archival records as well as combinations and derivatives of “academic progression,” “accreditation,” “CSWE,” “foundational degree,” “NASW,” and “pre-social
work.” The combination of archival data and a review of the published treatments of the issues allowed verification of results.

The analysis concluded with the acknowledgment of missing voices, stakeholders whose insights and viewpoints were absent from published accounts and internal records (hooks, 1994). Record-based themes and gaps in the discourse were synthesized into propositions whose merits were judged based on the breadth, strength, and consistency of evidence. In the end, this analysis produced six theories about factors that inhibited CSWE expansion beyond baccalaureate degree programs in the 1970s, articulated in the discussion below.

Findings

In line with critical pedagogy’s emphases on transparency and dialogue, portions of decision-makers’ words are shared to facilitate readers’ own development of conclusions. These findings are grouped thematically to facilitate pattern recognition and the synthesis of information.

Evidence of Innovation

Brochures, flyers, mailers, and programs preserved in the Social Welfare History Archives (SWHA) referred directly to experimentation with new forms of social work education. Executive Director Witte’s notes for a presentation to the CSWE Annual Program Meeting in 1963 proposed undergraduate social work, in-service training, or a three-month training program for social work aides. Six months later a CSWE consultant described “Dickie,” a proposal to initiate training for social work aides without graduate degrees (Cox, 1963). CSWE records include several unpublished manuscripts contemplating the use of community college graduates (Alman, 1965; CSWE 1969a, 1970b; Purvine, 1970).
Internal CSWE documents also detailed community colleges’ interest in developing social welfare-related associate degree programs. At a time when CSWE accredited programs in both the U.S. and Canada, Douglas E. Smith, Dean at the University of Alberta, privately informed CSWE and NASW leaders of his university’s collaboration with a local junior college to create “a two year program for Social Work Aides” (1958, p. 1). Doris Meek of Oakland City College wrote to CSWE Director Kendall “inquiring about the possibility of offering training for social service aides at the junior college level” (Kendall, 1963, p. 1). Samuel Stellman, of Ohio State University (1965) wrote Kendall to recommend community college preparation for employment. Kendall’s files likewise held letters from hospitals and agencies asking for guidance, job titles, job descriptions, and training for case aide positions in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Nassau Community College sought consultation with CSWE’s Pins, about “the possibility of offering a two-year curriculum in social work” (Greenberg, 1966, p.1). This evidence culminated in CSWE internal memo 69-360-9, dated 11/5/69. This nine-page document listed 156 “Community colleges expressing interest in community and social service programs” in 34 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Canada. Fifty-six of these programs were marked as “known to CSWE to be operational by Fall 1969” (1969b, p. 1). All included addresses and contact names.

Approaches to Improvement

SWHA collections describe decades of attention to professionalization. Past-president of the American Association of Medical Social Workers and respected educator Harriett Bartlett’s (1949) unpublished manuscript on issues in social work education asserted that social work should grow top-down, focusing on the preparation of its leaders and supervisors. Kendall spoke out about her conviction that social work needed to raise its academic requirements in order “to
provide the quality of personnel needed, lay claim to universal recognition as a profession, [and] win the place of honor it deserves among the professional disciplines” (1950, p. 2). In her draft press release for the report she co-authored with Ernest Hollis to assert the appropriate nature of social work education in the United States, Alice Taylor deemed graduate studies essential, given social work’s condition as “a profession so meagerly trained [that it] is obviously ill-equipped to manage other people's money and other people's lives” (1951, p. 1).

Several manuscripts referred to CSWE members’ ongoing concerns about the adequacy of undergraduate educational standards and employment qualifications (Alman, 1965; Dillick, 1965). Social worker, author, and community organizer Ernest Harper requested a careful study of potential job duties, and appropriate training, to keep “the public protected from the use of technicians in jobs requiring professional judgments” (1951, p. 55). Workshop participants continued to debate the relative merits of undergraduate degrees versus graduate studies or development of “a career by doing” through on-the-job learning (Allerton House Workshop, 1966, p. 1). CSWE’s 1969 ad hoc working group upheld “the phenomenally rapid growth of junior or community colleges in recent years” and “the extremely rapid development of a new level of education for social welfare” as reasons to limit attempts at any nation-wide systemic responses (Gore, 1969, p. 11).

**Beliefs about Associate Degree Holders**

Social work education leaders expressed distinct reservations about technical education. Harper ruled out technical training; undergraduate education should “teach generalizations and principles rather than [be] vocationally slanted” (1951, p. 52-53). CSWE’s first position statement on undergraduate education insisted such education should focus on teaching theory, not practice skills or technical aspects of social work (Kendall, 1956). Kendall thought “it would
be a step backward to initiate special training at the junior college level….For this kind of work certain kinds of knowledge and understanding of man [sic] and society are absolutely essential” (1963, p. 1). CSWE Educational Consultant Mary Houk reported the organization had “some question about the appropriateness and advisability of teaching social welfare content before students have had a good base of liberal arts courses and basic preparation in the social sciences” (1966, p. 1). Three years later, another CSWE consultant on undergraduate education likewise noted that community college graduates are often seen as less capable than traditional undergraduates (Gore, 1969). At a time when CSWE was engaged in joint ventures with the American Association of Junior Colleges, its internal analysis noted that “academicians generally look with jaundiced eyes on autonomous departments with a pronounced vocational goal” (1969a, p. 3). The Hollis-Taylor (1951) report deemed semiprofessional social work technicians dangerous in the absence of sufficient professionals. Notes for a 1970 training in New York conveyed the confusion many shared about associate degree-educated technicians:

    Where does such a program fit into the educational continuum? (And, similarly, where in practice?) Should such a program be vocational or within liberal arts? Is it aimed at transfer to a senior college and a bachelor’s degree program or for immediate practice? (Purvine, 1970, p. 4)

These questions remain unanswered.

**Cultural considerations**

Cultural issues, as well, appeared in references of the period to social work aides, technicians, and paraprofessionals. These titles variously referred to—and often conflated—baccalaureate graduates, associate degree holders, volunteers, and indigenous workers (CSWE, 1972; Levinson & Schiller, 1965; Pins, 1970). A working paper produced for internal use only
by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare proposed hiring technicians as a remedy for “the inability of middle-class professionals…to bridge the cognitive and value gap between themselves and their lower-income clients,” such as the unwed “slum dwellers…[with] under-nourished, inadequately clothed, and intellectually impoverished children” (Levinson & Schiller, 1965, p. 3, 9). They believed that the working poor understood such conditions but were prone to employment problems including “apathy or hostile acting out of pent up frustrations” (p. 3), violations of confidentiality, abuses of power, and obliviousness to the subtlety of issues.

Meanwhile, the training department of an anti-poverty program reported in 1963 that “The problem lies in attracting a large pool of the ‘right’ low income people…to screen out the less motivated, less-work centered candidates, [and the] overly-emotional” (Riessman, 1963, p. 5). Researchers, practitioners, funders, and educators alike expressed concerns about potential social service employees from the “lower-class,” given their perceived differences from middle-class social workers with at least baccalaureate degree educations from traditional universities. NASW’s members were evidently cognizant of their middle-class status and the racial and class divides between themselves and the “urban slum residents” (Brager, 1965, p. 34) which social work might attract through the development of new roles for paraprofessional technicians (Levitt, 1968). CSWE itself noted in its guide for associate degree programs that community colleges tended to be in “ghetto areas” and attract “the non-academically oriented student [and] educationally disadvantaged students” (1970a, p. 7, 24). In contrast, social workers, “like other professional groups, tend to come from the relatively privileged economic and cultural strata of the population” (Hollis & Taylor, 1951, p. 241).
Discussion

NASW editorialized in favor of recognition of associate degrees in social work (Briar, 1974), and CSWE’s Executive Directors once proclaimed that such degrees were part of the social work education curriculum (Kendall, 1977; Pins, 1971), but such statements resulted in no system changes. In the end, none of the reports, editorials, or manuscripts demonstrated tangible progress toward—or even plans for—social work education at community colleges in the United States. Instead, newly discovered primary source data and the literature hint at several explanations why CSWE chose not to admit community colleges into membership nor accredit associate degrees in social work: CSWE was a deliberate organization, slow to change. CSWE focused on its organizational development. Many social work educators regarded community colleges and their students warily. CSWE generally backed the status quo population of social workers. CSWE was free to choose its path. Results affirm that community colleges were simply not important to CSWE.

There is overwhelming public evidence that expansion of CSWE was a long, slow, careful process (Hoffman, 2013; Shank, 1993). A debate over the appropriateness of baccalaureate degrees ran from the 1920s into the 1980s. Kendall (1950) and others argued that social work needed to become more academic and pushed for higher levels of education. Further, internal documents demonstrated how some social work leaders resisted baccalaureate social work education for years after board approval. Just as CSWE would not rush the addition of baccalaureate degrees, the addition of community colleges would have required years or decades of consideration, making movement unlikely until the 1980s. By that time labor demands diminished, and many associate degree programs adopted a human services identity.
As BSW programs have recognized community colleges as potential feeder schools, individual colleges have facilitated the matriculation of students from local community colleges (Messinger, 2014; Neuman, 2006). The scholarly literature documents uncertainty about how to handle community college transfers, however, rather than any systematic or national efforts within American social work education to address the barriers to upward transfer faced by community college graduates (Gibson, 1997; Gore 1969). If anything, CSWE seemed to distance itself from a perceived underclass. Following Abraham Flexner’s 1915 critique of social work as not truly a profession, social work leaders emphasized improvement of the discipline’s standing and wages by increasing its educational standards (Kendall, 1950). Further, as Brawley argued, social work needed to defend itself against the political moves of declassification. Highly concerned about the success of its existent programs during the 1960s and 1970s, CSWE focused on newly admitted baccalaureate programs rather than further expansion.

Perhaps social work leaders did not trust the people associated with community colleges. CSWE member schools’ and community colleges’ student populations differed significantly in age, socioeconomic status, class, culture, nation of origin, and race. CSWE leaders, especially Kendall, reliably emphasized the importance of a liberal arts undergraduate education and showed aversion to vocational instruction in the U.S. Private correspondence shows community colleges’ newness caused concern and uncertainty within CSWE. Internal memos and reports confess leaders’ doubts about community college students’ academic abilities and their ability to serve competently. CSWE and NASW themselves explicitly called-out the racial and class differences between themselves and the ranks from which paraprofessionals would come. CSWE publicly promoted gatekeeping at schools of social work. Community colleges seemed to contrast sharply with the professional middle-class image CSWE sought to portray. Community
colleges welcomed all students, even those without high school diplomas, whereas CSWE programs at all levels practiced selective admissions. Social work leaders within and without CSWE clearly stated their intentions to protect the public from what was seen as under-educated, slum-dwelling, overly-emotional, less-motivated, non-professionals.

This perspective may be exemplified by private CSWE records (Cox, 1963) about a training program for people without graduate degrees, stored in a folder labeled “Dickie” though none of its contents referenced anyone named Richard or Dick. “Dickie” was a colloquial American term of that era for false-front shirts with no backs or sleeves. Use of this label would have been consistent with attitudes within CSWE at the time about any non-MSW employees: cheap impostors, objects that look fine until you get close enough to inspect them, fake. Social work in the U.S. had long been a product of educated, wealthy, Northeast, and White populations. Social work education’s establishment—striving to “lay claim to universal recognition as a profession [and] win the place of honor it deserves” (Kendall, 1950, p.2)—may have regarded community college students and paraprofessionals as a disconcerting “other.” The evidence reviewed indicates CSWE sought to admit only the established liberal arts baccalaureate system it already knew, reluctantly at that. Class differences and contentment within CSWE to replicate the status quo social work population may explain resistance to changing social work education’s identity and culture.

No external pressures forced CSWE to go further. NASW may have lacked the influence to sway CSWE, with whom it severed formal ties in 1971 (CSWE, 2018). No public or internal records reflected an organized effort by community colleges to connect with CSWE. Instead, community colleges developed human service programs staffed predominantly by non-social workers. This move created as significant a barrier for partnership as Brennen, Brawley, and
Schindler hypothesized. The truth is that community college programs consented to their exclusion from social work.

From start to finish the relationship between these systems was frail. Letters, flyers, memos, and meeting notes from 1950 to 1975 demonstrate that CSWE resisted change as long as possible. Marginal comments and unpublished manuscripts instead reveal leaders’ determination to professionalize social work by limiting participation in social work education. Except for a few years in the late 1960s and early 1970s, CSWE appears to have ignored community colleges, rarely intending more than an advisory role. In their correspondence, Directors Kendall and Pins stated their hopes not to invite associate degree programs into CSWE membership.

Public and private records show CSWE sought to professionalize social work education, growing the discipline top-down and raising the profession’s educational expectations. The idea of social work education at community colleges hardly went beyond consideration. CSWE proceeded with baccalaureate and master’s degree programs. Community colleges proceeded with associate degrees in human services, creating a proxy for social work education at community colleges without CSWE involvement.

The scarcity of organized external pressure facilitated the preservation of social work’s status quo workforce and movement away from programs and populations deemed other-than-social work due to differences in degree names, faculty preparation, admission requirements, and class. On behalf of the profession, CSWE did what was necessary to meet workforce needs while protecting its members’ jobs. Critical pedagogists would conclude that in doing so social work maintained established structures rather than embracing the often marginalized populations found at American community colleges—the working poor, immigrants, people of color, English
language learners, and people living with disabling conditions—despite the profession’s stated appreciation for inclusion.

**Limitations**

This study reviewed merely one aspect of the history of social work education—consideration of accreditation for associate degrees—in a single nation. In the absence of publicly accessible archives for the American Association of Community Colleges, this research focused on CSWE records. This qualitative effort to ascertain the motives for decisions made decades ago is inherently speculative, limited to the quality of the available documents and the interpretations made. While this subset of the Social Welfare History Archives represents a convenience sample, these archives nevertheless afford the best available access to influential figures who framed the discussion and CSWE’s decisions at that time. Further, this research reviewed only a small portion of CSWE’s actions during this period. In focusing on the relationship between CSWE and community colleges, this research overlooks the profession’s work to ameliorate poverty, fight racism, and build social justice during the mid-twentieth century, including the integration of American schools of social work. Finally, as the investigator I brought my own identity and biases to this work, as both a licensed social worker long-affiliated with prestigious universities and as a community college professor. How these affected the selection and interpretation of materials is difficult to ascertain.

**Conclusions**

This forgotten history of social work education’s brief attention to community colleges in the United States suggests options for the future. American BSW programs may wish to assess the strength of their relationships with community colleges, potential sources of motivated and well-prepared students. Programs that have not already done so can explore articulation
agreements with local community colleges offering relevant associate degrees. After all, 41% of all U.S. undergraduates—including 52% of Hispanic and 56% of Native American students—study at a community college (AACC, 2017).

Definition of the social work education continuum in the United States may not be resolved, as doctoral and associate degree issues reemerge. Though CSWE (2017) itself is undergoing redefinition through its decision to accredit Doctorate of Social Work programs, it is premature to ask whether CSWE should also reconsider incorporation of associate degree programs. Foundational research questions remain. Have community colleges remained interested in social work education? What happened to those community college programs on CSWE’s list? Do foundational programs in other nations suggest how associate degrees in social work might impact social work education in the United States? Finally, ongoing research can evaluate liberatory and oppressive practices within social work education, acknowledging missing voices and ways that educational practices align the discipline with the elite or with the vulnerable.

In turn, this points to possible changes in organizational policies and procedures. Attention to power differences and privilege requires courage, creativity, and the humility to engage a diversity of voices in dialogue. As tuition costs rise, it remains an ongoing responsibility of all within social work to address barriers to social work education, especially for marginalized populations. This includes attention to the cost and environment of social work education, English language requirements, and the lack of role models within social work for minority, immigrant, and first-generation college students. The role of associate programs is changing, as four out of five community college students now intend to earn baccalaureate
degrees (AACC, 2015). What is their place in the profession? What is their proper relationship with four-year institutions?

The rich tradition of social work education continues to evolve. Hopefully, knowledge of the past will highlight possibilities for the second century of social work education.
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Characterizing Social Work Education at Community Colleges in the United States

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Abstract

Though unrecognized by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and absent from the peer-reviewed literature, community colleges in the United States offer associate degrees in social work. Little is known about them, and the validity of their claim to teach social work is untested. This research located 57 such programs and evaluated their ability to meet customary benchmarks for social work education: CSWE’s 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). One-third of community college program directors completed surveys about their programs, reportedly meeting 41% of select EPAS measures for BSW programs. Consequently, this empirical study of community college programs challenges the consensus definition of social work education in the United States as beginning in baccalaureate studies.

*Keywords*: social work education, community college, associate degree, EPAS
Characterizing Social Work Education at Community Colleges in the United States

Social work publications, practice groups, and professional organizations alike define social work education in the United States as baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral education in preparation for professional roles (CSWE 2009, 2017; Frumpkin & Lloyd, 1995; Hoffman, 2013; Shank, 1993). Though social workers debated the appropriateness of baccalaureate social work education well into the 1980s (Brennen, 1984; Leighninger, 2000), the three-level definition of a social work continuum has been stable and widely accepted since. Social work leaders long ago concluded that including associate degree programs was merely the fanciful notion of a few people during an era of tremendous social change (Brennen, 1984; Frumpkin & Lloyd, 1995; Kendall, 2002). The consensus is that social work is not taught at community colleges: instead, community colleges’ human services programs deliver something like social work education (Berg-Weger, Birkenmaier, Tebb, & Rosenthal 1999; Brawley, 1975, 1980, 1981; Brawley & Schindler, 1972; Romney, 1972; McPheeters & King, 1971; Ockerman, Kay, & Cunningham, 1996). But we may be mistaken. Despite being unrecognized by professional organizations and the scholarly literature, dozens of community colleges in the United States claim to teach social work.

There is no public information about this collection of community college social work education programs at present. Their number, enrollment, foci, quality, outcomes, student body, faculty, and curricula, for example, are unknown outside of the institutions themselves. Nor has licensure checked their worth. Licensure of social workers with associate degrees in three states and one U.S. territory—Massachusetts, Ohio, South Dakota, and the U.S. Virgin Islands—demonstrates that some accept the authenticity of social work education at that level. These licenses, however, are available to individuals with non-social work associates degrees, and only
Ohio is actually home to community colleges awarding ASW degrees. The absence of both literature about and licenses for ASW graduates in the rest of the nation suggests ignorance of the option, uncertainty about the idea, or outright rejection of its merit.

This manuscript is the introduction of associates in social work degrees at community colleges within the scholarly literature. This descriptive quantitative research named and characterized existent associate degree programs in social work through comparison to recognized social work education criteria. Two questions were explored via internet searches and a survey of community college program directors: 1. What community colleges award associate degrees in social work? 2. Do community college social work programs meet current CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) for baccalaureate social work programs?

This evaluation of an educational system—social work education at community colleges in the U.S.—tested the validity of their assertions against the accuracy of the consensus of social work education as beginning in CSWE-approved baccalaureate studies (CSWE, 2009, 2015; Frumpkin & Lloyd, 1995; Hoffman, 2013). If these schools do, in fact, teach social work as commonly recognized, this review would demonstrate the existence of earlier social work education in the U.S., freestanding of CSWE, making our social work education continuum larger than currently thought. Furthermore, the confirmation of associate degrees in social work would raise new questions about accessible, affordable pathways for students interested in social work education and about mutually beneficial relationships between community colleges and Baccalaureate Social Work (BSW) programs, CSWE, and the social work profession at large. Conversely, the failure of these schools to meet standards for social work education could indicate misrepresentation and misappropriation of our discipline. Either result would deserve public consideration.
Literature Review

The Separation of Community Colleges and CSWE

Extensive searches of peer-reviewed English-language sources suggest that scholarly literature has never identified the colleges that offer associate degrees in social work nor evaluated them. As shown in Product One, the only accrediting body for social work education in the United States, CSWE, briefly considered membership for community colleges in the late 1960s and early 1970s when more than 150 community colleges privately stated interest in offering social work education (McPheeters & Ryan, 1971; Olson, 1966). Some stakeholders, NASW among them, advocated in favor of the community colleges (Andrew, 1973; Briar, 1974; Brawley, 1981; Geis, 1965). Though titles for the newly created community college programs varied widely—sociology, human services, social services, and more—several observers believed at least some of these schools, in fact, taught social work and did so competently (Bernard, 1978; Departmental Task Force, 1965; Pins, 1971). CSWE never admitted into membership or accredited associate degree programs, however. As noted in Product One, the organization described these programs as teaching community services or social services—useful but other than social work. Community college programs, meanwhile, continued and expanded under names such as human and social services, loosely affiliated with social work (Brawley, 1975, 1980, 1981, 1982; Schindler & Brawley, 1993). Since the late 1970s, published scholarly works have implied that community colleges teach human services, but not social work.

Absence from the Literature

The little written about social work education at community colleges in the United States is generally decades old and speculative. Magee (1979) ambiguously referred to associate degree students within the social work education continuum but never revealed the schools involved or
articulated their course of study. Others would soon reject Magee’s characterization. Brennen (1984) wrote two pages on the story of community colleges’ brief relationship with social work education but rebuffed the possibility of such associate degrees. In two sentences the 18th edition of the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* rejected the previous edition’s conceptualization of associate degrees in social work, deeming it incorrect and overly optimistic (Frumpkin & Lloyd, 1995). CWSE (2009) states it does not accredit associate degrees, given that they are not preparation for professional work, without mentioning whether associate degrees in social work exist. One recent article referred to an American community college hosting upper-level BSW courses administered by a nearby CSWE-accredited university program without acknowledging that the community college itself offered a social work degree (Messinger, 2014). The contemporary scholarly literature remains otherwise silent on any relationships between community colleges and social work systems in the United States, belying today’s educational realities. Peer-reviewed scholarship from the past forty years has not evaluated ASW programs, as it has not even articulated whether ASW programs exist. The extent of scholars’ and four-year institutions’ awareness and understanding of social work education at community colleges is unclear, given the absence of any such information in peer-reviewed literature.

Community Colleges Awarding Associate Degrees in Social Work

In contrast to the silence within the literature and the profession’s present consensus that the continuum of social work education begins at the baccalaureate level, students across the United States earn associate degrees in social work. At least by name they appear to. Internet searches conducted in 2018 revealed at least 57 community college programs offering associate degrees in social work, social welfare, or pre-social work (see the Appendix). Dozens more colleges refer to social work in the marketing of other associate degrees.
Evaluations of Associate Degrees to Date

Thus far these programs have not been reviewed in any scientific manner. Whether they effectively teach social work, as commonly understood, is uncertain. Researchers have evaluated community college *Human Services* programs (CSWE 1970; Feldstein, 1968; McGrath, 1989; Schindler & Brawley, 1993; Sparkman-Key & Reiter, 2016; Young, True, & Packard, 1976). Like BSW programs, associate degrees in Human Services were found to be generalist in focus and to prepare graduates for direct service work (Brawley and Schindler, 1972). As recommended by CSWE’s 1970 curricular recommendations for associate degrees, coursework included human development, human behavior, group dynamics, social service systems, interviewing skills, and field experience (Brawley, 1981). Scholars have researched two-year social work diplomas and related foundational degrees in Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom, as well (Coleman, Calhoun, & Rogers, 2004; Edmond, Aranda, Gaudoin, & Law, 2012; Fenge, 2011; Hannis, 1995; Kendall, 1977; Magee, 1979; Nutter & Zapf, 1990; Zapf, et al., 2003). Missing from the literature, however, is any discussion of the extent, nature, outcomes, or quality of associate degree programs in social work in the United States.

**Methods**

The apparent discrepancy between the consensus definition of social work education and the existence of associate degree social work programs calls for an objective review of these programs. As such, this descriptive research was quantitative and utilized a structured framework, a survey of associate in social work program directors inquiring about their use of objectively-measurable practices outlined in the EPAS for BSW programs.
Population and Sampling Process

I sought input from as many program directors as possible, up to the entire population. This process required determination of that constituent population, defined as U.S.-based member colleges of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) which grant associate degrees with “social work” or “social welfare” in the official degree title, with or without prefixes and limiting terms such as “pre.” In the absence of any known listing of such colleges, this research began with recurrent internet searches. Search terms included “community college,” “junior college,” “technical college,” “tribal college,” “associate,” “social work,” “social welfare,” “pre-social work,” and their derivatives. AACC membership facilitated definitional boundaries by providing the largest roster of American community colleges, a term lacking a formal, binding definition. Likewise, colleges outside of the United States and those not using the words “social work” or “social welfare” in the actual degree title were excluded.

As Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009) recommend, I then recruited respondents through postal letters and follow-up email messages to all faculty or administration members responsible for oversight of an associate in social work program. Introductory letters included a $2 bill as an expression of appreciation. Follow-up emails gave program directors a direct link to the online survey, administered through Qualtrics. Up to two reminder emails were sent at one-week intervals to directors who had not responded or completed the survey, which was open in March 2018. The university Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved this study, including sample recruitment and survey administration.

Survey Instrument

There is no one correct manner to measure social work education. Associate in Social Work (ASW) programs, like those at any level, can be evaluated in myriad ways, using various
tools. ASW programs can be judged as to whether they deliver a generalist education, prepare students for both practice and further social work study, develop the knowledge, values, and skills needed for professional practice, promote students’ social and emotional growth, or cultivate critical thinking skills, for example (CSWE, 2015; Shank, 1993). Complicating the evaluation of ASW programs is that such programs operate in the absence of agreed-upon guidelines. There no accrediting body, no voluntary membership organization to which they belong. Any tool used to evaluate their fidelity to social work norms must therefore be invented for this purpose or adapted from another use. This study relied on the later, adaptation of an existing tool, to facilitate comprehension by the social work establishment within the United States. Specifically this investigation utilized the most closely-related tool developed by CSWE, the recognized social work education accreditation body: CSWE’s 2015 Educational and Policy Standards (EPAS) for BSW programs.

CSWE’s EPAS are not inherently correct or best; there are many ways to assess social work education (Colby, 2014; Drisko, 2014; International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2004; Robbins, 2014; Taylor & Bogo, 2014). The imposition of standards to which ASW programs have not ascribed is inherently unfair; there is no reason they can rightly be held to them. Additionally, students in their first years of college—ASW students—are disadvantaged in comparison to students in their final years of undergraduate studies—BSW students. Furthermore, community colleges live out different missions than universities, with very different resources. These realities make any fidelity by ASW programs to CSWE’s standards for BSW programs noteworthy.

Nevertheless, CSWE is that body which exists to ensure the quality of social work education. Further, there are precedents for the scholarly use of accreditation tools—including
the EPAS—to measure education systems at other levels, for other disciplines, and in other nations (Dubus & Greene, 2015; Holtzhausen, 2011; Kumm et al., 2014; McInnes, 2013; Murphy, 2011; Taylor & Bogo, 2014; Voss et al, 2017). The EPAS are a widely-recognized, long-used tool by which social work programs are standardized (Hoffman, 2013; Robbins, 2014). CSWE EPAS fashioned a norm in social work education in the United States. Besides offering widespread acceptance and a standardized tool, the EPAS for BSW programs allow for direct comparison with the next highest (and first accepted) level of social work education. The EPAS do not and cannot measure the complexity and depth of social work education. This investigation is not an evaluation of ASW program merits or worthiness, however, but rather a descriptive study seeking indications of likeness with social work education at other levels. It is a comparison with social work education as commonly understood, which the EPAS represent in the United States, the type of standards which the social work establishment would likely apply to ASW should ASW programs seek recognition.

Some accreditation standards require interpretation. The determination whether a program’s mission “is consistent with the institutional mission” or the school’s “field education program connects the theoretical and conceptual contributions of the classroom and field settings” (CSWE, 2015, 1.0.2, B2.2.1) require judgment and justification, for example. To ease data collection and facilitate its analysis this initial survey research was limited to objective measures. Standards calling for “sufficient” efforts, “competent” performance, or evidence that a school “demonstrates” a characteristic were excluded. To ease survey completion and thereby increase the response rate, I further narrowed inquiries to the one-quarter of EPAS standards judged most significant in consultation with other social work educators. Survey questions focused on program policies, curricula, faculty, and administration rather than program plans,
communication standards, assessment details, and practices common to all academic disciplines. Structural likenesses and dissimilarities present a useful starting point for comparison.

The resulting 23 objective EPAS standards for BSW programs—covering programs’ missions and goals, faculty, program directors, fieldwork requirements, field directors, admissions and advising policies, curricula, and assessment measures—were converted into nominal yes/no questions, with the exception of a numerical response for field hours and the option to select all applicable curricular components. Respondents were also invited to indicate their gender and age via nominal or categorical options, respectively. Table 1 discloses a complete list of survey questions.

Survey Procedures

Survey responses were identified, not blind. Survey respondents could move forward and backward, change their answers, or choose not to answer questions. The online survey tool employed skip logic to omit items which would not be applicable based on earlier responses. Following completion of the survey I used school websites and online aggregators of information about U.S. colleges to gather data on each responding school’s enrollment, degree offerings, accreditation, minority enrollment, tuition, age, and status as a public, private, or religious institution.

Data Analysis

This descriptive research proceeded without a hypothesis, focused on descriptive statistics including frequency, distribution, and counts. Responses to 21 dichotomous yes/no questions were coded as 1 and 0, allowing for the calculation of the group's mean response to those questions. Dichotomous items that were not applicable and thus not posed to respondents due to skip logic were automatically coded as negative responses. Survey responses without
answers to any questions were excluded from analysis. I calculated the mean and median field education hours and EPAS-named practice competencies included in the curriculum, as well as the modal competency and the frequency of each. Additionally, I manually coded each school as meeting or failing to meet the BSW EPAS standards for field education (400 or more hours) and curricular content, resulting in 23 dichotomous scores for each school. I calculated the mean of each school’s responses, ranked schools by score, and calculated the range and mean scores for the sample. The sample’s mean score on all responses would be claimed as the measure of ASW program similarity to BSW programs.

All colleges in the population were sorted by region to reveal the percentage of programs in the West, Midwest, South, and Northeast. Likewise, a national map of the population was created using Google Maps. Responding colleges, those in the sample group, were characterized further by their range and mean number of students enrolled, the percentage of minority enrollment, years since founding, and annual full-time in-state tuition. The frequency of regional accreditation, schools’ status as public, private, or religious, and schools offering baccalaureate degrees were identified. Finally, the modal regional accreditor was determined.

**Design Limitations**

This study may substantiate the existence of programs which award associate degrees in social work but struggles to prove their nature, given the limited evidence generated. ASW programs were evaluated with a standard for a system to which they do not belong. There is no relevant published literature to verify the findings. This study used only 23 of 86 EPAS BSW standards (27%), chosen in consultation with other social work educators. Further, this study is based on self-report. Self-assessment is rife with errors and lacks accountability (Drisko, 2014).
This study lacks qualitative data and omits important program characteristics such as demographics, mission, size, retention rates, completion rates, and employment outcomes.

**Findings**

This research sought first to identify and characterize schools offering associate degrees in social work. Identifying their names, number, and locations creates a first-ever catalog, a tool for research, academic partnerships, and planning. Secondly, it strove to determine the extent of the resemblance between these ASW programs and the norm in undergraduate social work studies, represented by CSWE EPAS for BSW programs. Together, these outcomes should generate an informed perspective on the popular understanding of social work education as a three-level continuum.

**Colleges Awarding ASW Degrees**

Community colleges conferring ASW degrees do not appear to fit a single mold. As shown in the Appendix, schools in Alabama, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Washington, and West Virginia—nearly half of the states—bestow associate degrees in social work. Program directors from 19 colleges completed the survey, creating a sample of 19 and a response rate of 33%. Four other program directors opened the survey without answering questions. All colleges in the sample are regionally accredited public institutions offering associate degrees as their highest award. They range in student enrollment from 1,923 to 30,112 students, with a mean enrollment of 12,376. Minority enrollment reaches from 9 to 95%, with a mean of 38%. Schools vary from 28 to 120 years old, with an average of 68 years in operation. Annual tuition for full-time in-state students extends from $2,094 to $8,070, with a mean annual tuition of $4,444.
ASW Program Adherence to BSW Standards

Likewise, sample programs varied in their match with BSW standards. Individual school results ranged from 0% to 83% correspondence with the standards. Overall enactment of BSW standards was moderate; per self-report, the ASW programs surveyed met 41% of the chosen EPAS standards for BSW programs. The median school reportedly achieved 43% adherence. Figure 1 summarizes the fulfillment of BSW standards. Table 1 indicates the percentage of responding ASW programs meeting each of the 23 BSW EPAS standards surveyed.

**Figure 1: Associate in Social Work program fulfillment of select CSWE EPAS standards for BSW programs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EPAS BSW standards met</th>
<th>0-20%</th>
<th>21-40%</th>
<th>41-60%</th>
<th>61-80%</th>
<th>81-100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EPAS competencies.**

CSWE (2015) named nine specific abilities it deems necessary for practice. As shown in Figure 2, most ASW programs reported covering seven or more competencies, and each EPAS-specified practice competency was reportedly included in at least 40% of curricula. Most programs surveyed stated they assess student performance toward all selected competencies.
Table 1. Percentage of Associate in Social Work programs meeting select CSWE standards for BSW programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSWE EPAS</th>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>Met BSW standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>Does the SW program have a mission statement?</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0.3</td>
<td>Does the program have defined goals?</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2.0.3</td>
<td>Below is a list of abilities relevant to social work. Please select all to which your program teaches.</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.5</td>
<td>How many total hours of field education are required for graduation with an associate degree in social work at your college?</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.6</td>
<td>Does the SW program have criteria for admission into field education?</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.6</td>
<td>Do students have to meet specific criteria for admission to the SW program beyond those required for registration at the school?</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.11</td>
<td>Does the program have policies regarding field placement in an organization in which a student is also employed?</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.11</td>
<td>Do those policies regarding SW field placement in an organization in which a student is also employed require the student’s tasks differ from those they have as an employee?</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.5</td>
<td>Does the program have a written policy against granting social work course credit for life experience or previous work experience?</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.6</td>
<td>Is all professional advising provided only by social work program faculty and staff?</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.2</td>
<td>Do all faculty who teach social work practice courses have both a master's degree in social work and at least 2 years of post-master's social work practice experience?</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.3</td>
<td>Does the program have at least 1 full-time faculty member per 25 students in the program?</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3.2.4</td>
<td>Does the SW program have at least 2 full-time faculty members?</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3.2.4</td>
<td>Do at least half of the full-time faculty members have Masters in Social Work degrees?</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3.3.4(a)</td>
<td>Does the program director have a Masters in Social Work degree?</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B3.3.4(b) Does the director have a full-time appointment to the social work program? 68%

B3.3.4(c) Does the program director have at least 25% of their time reserved for program administration? 53%

3.3.5 Does your SW program have a field director in addition to the program director? 11%

B3.3.5(b) Does the field education director have both a master’s degree in social work and at least 2 years of post-baccalaureate or post-master’s social work degree practice experience? 5%

B3.3.5(c) Does the field director have at least 25% of their time reserved for program administration? 11%

4.0.1 Does the SW program have a plan to assess student outcomes for all of these abilities? 74%

4.0.1 Does the SW program use at least 2 measures to assess each ability? 47%

4.0.1 Is one of the assessment measures based on demonstration of the ability (either in real or simulated practice situations)? 58%

Total mean score for all programs and standards 41%

Figure 2: Percentage of Associate in Social Work programs including EPAS-defined competencies in their curricula

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>100%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Competency 1</td>
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<td>Competency 2</td>
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<td>Competency 6</td>
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<td>Competency 7</td>
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<td>Competency 8</td>
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<td>Competency 9</td>
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<tr>
<td>None</td>
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</table>
Field education and program standards.

Results were highest for Educational Policy 1.0, Program Mission and Goals. Eleven schools mandated field education, as shown in Figure 3; only three programs required more than 63 hours. Respondents answered affirmatively to meeting BSW standards for staff numbers, qualifications, and duties 47 to 68% of the time, with few having a separate field education director, admissions criteria, or policies against course credit for life or work experience.

Discussion

These findings reveal answers to both research questions: What community colleges award associate degrees in social work? and Do community college social work programs meet current EPAS for BSW programs? Such colleges can now be named and provisionally described, and the extent of their fit with BSW programs hypothesized, despite the limitations of this first exploration of the subject. Together the results prove that the conventional definition of social work education understates its reality. Community colleges in 24 states across the nation, accredited colleges with diverse student bodies, offer associate degrees in social work with an
apparent resemblance to social work education as commonly conceived. Their 57 programs more than triple the sixteen DSW programs becoming eligible for CSWE membership and number more than two-thirds of the 75 social work Ph.D. programs in the U.S. (CSWE, 2017; Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work, 2018). Despite missing from public discourse, ASW programs are a considerable presence in the United States. The scope of social work education deserves reconsideration.

**Colleges Awarding ASW Degrees**

These results extend a discipline’s narrative by presenting the first scholarly public data on social work education at community colleges in the United States, naming and locating 57 colleges offering associate degrees in social work. Like schools in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Canada (Kendall, 1977), they profess to provide two-year foundational degrees in social work. Each school is regionally accredited. The schools tend to be large, long-established, racially diverse, and affordable. As seen in Figure 4, these schools exist coast to coast, predominantly in the South and Midwest. If their offerings prove to be true social work education, the definition of

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**Figure 4: Locations of U.S. colleges offering associate degrees in social work**
social work education as a three-level continuum may need refinement. This study’s second research question examined the legitimacy of their degree titles.

**Similarities Between ASW and BSW Programs**

Decades ago Brawley and Schindler (1972) evaluated community- and social-service associate degrees. They found courses in human development, human behavior, and group dynamics, substantial general education components, and expectations for field experience. In sum, they discovered generalist programs with apparent similarities to the BSW programs welcomed by CSWE at that time. These new survey results assert that today’s community college social work programs likewise meet a moderate portion of current standards for baccalaureate social work programs set by the responsible national association. This information counters the conclusions of existing literature (Brawley, 1980, 1981; Schindler & Brawley, 1993) that community colleges provide Human Services education alone. The ASW programs considered resemble BSW programs most strongly in their specified goals, mission statements, and attention to CSWE-articulated practice competencies.

ASW programs may use fewer and less-qualified faculty and staff. They typically permit open admission and educational credit for prior learning experiences, both of which go against CSWE policies. The most significant difference between ASW and BSW programs may be fieldwork, social work’s signature pedagogy (CSWE, 2015). Only one surveyed program met baccalaureate EPAS standards for fieldwork. The number of required fieldwork hours at schools mandating it may be appropriate for associate-level (sophomore-year) students, but nearly half of the programs surveyed required none.

ASW programs appear to meet CSWE’s BSW standards for faculty, program directors, and program assessment roughly half the time. There is little standardization. As in studies of
Human Services education by McGrath (1989) and Schindler and Brawley (1993), heterogeneity among today’s ASW programs is the norm. Responses to individual survey questions and schools’ composite scores tend to form standard bell curves, centered at the mid-point. Results suggest ASW programs are consistent with BSW programs on 41% of standards assessed.

**Reasons for Variance Between Associate and Baccalaureate Social Work Education**

These community college programs meet several standards for baccalaureate programs. As a quantitative exploration of the status quo, this research did not investigate the causes of differences between ASW and BSW programs. To state the obvious, however, associate and baccalaureate degree programs can be expected to differ as much as baccalaureate and master’s degree programs do. As noted by Dubus and Greene (2015), different educational systems may not share a common purpose, history, culture, or priorities. Two-year colleges differ significantly from traditional liberal arts colleges and research universities in their missions, faculty, curricula, resources, and student bodies. Regardless, these associate degree programs in social work do an average job of meeting BSW standards and bear a clear resemblance to social work education as commonly accepted in the United States. While individual community colleges may have articulation agreements or other relationships with BSW programs, there are no national or regional standards. They would likely match even more closely had they been trying to meet CSWE standards and had they been supported in doing so.

Programs vary, but initial results suggest that many ASW programs may represent bona fide social work education, meeting a little under half of the recognized standards for BSW training of adults in the knowledge, values, and skills necessary to alleviate suffering and build a more just society. ASW programs resemble BSW programs to a degree, despite numerous limitations. Such variance between programs at different levels should be expected. Further,
failure to meet all EPAS is typical even for accredited BSW programs, particularly for programs without a long history of relationship with and developmental support from CSWE. For an ad hoc performance, meeting 41% of assessed BSW standards is a reasonable showing. Even more remarkably some ASW programs met as many as 74 and 83% of BSW standards.

As noted above, dozens of community colleges use the term “social work” in the marketing of degrees which are not Associate Social Work degrees. The likeness of those programs to social work education has not been verified. Social work educators can rightly question the fairness of such marketing.

Limitations of the Findings

This study was unable to prompt responses from the entire population. The 19 programs which chose to respond may not be representative; schools with less favorable characteristics may have chosen not to self-report. This facet alone inhibits generalization. Moreover, additional ASW programs may exist. This initial exploration gives a limited view of ASW programs, conveying only evidence of their existence and a rudimentary description. The goal of this research, though quantitative, is not the development of precise estimates of associate in social work degree programs, however. The intra-population differences are unknown, as all characteristics of the population are unknown. As such, the degree of precision is inherently uncertain, as are the reasons for variance amongst ASW programs. Nevertheless, the goal of this survey is a characterization of this population, the development of a basic outline of their number and shape. This sketch can be achieved with data from 33% of such programs. This work documents a contradiction and sets a course for further study. Moreover, program assessment beginning with self-report, followed by further external analysis, fits with established norms for the evaluation of social work education at other levels.
Conclusions

Social work programs operate at four levels of higher education, with two outside CSWE oversight. ASW programs, specifically, demonstrate commonality despite having no outside force calling for (or assisting with) their collective achievement of particular performance measures. This generates many implications for education. Students intending to major in social work should investigate all of their local options, including ASW programs. Those needing to minimize their tuition costs, in particular, benefit from investigating community college opportunities. There is now a catalog of ASW programs to consider. For quality improvement and quality assurance, ASW program directors may wish to engage one another in partnerships or produce guidelines, like those generated by their colleagues in the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work. In turn, BSW programs can consider their relationships with ASW programs. Community college students often intend baccalaureate studies, including in social work (Beckerman & Fontana, 1989; Clavner & Clavner, 1987; Coleman et al., 2004; Messinger, 2014). These schools may be fruitful recruiting grounds. Articulation agreements can serve institutions at both levels as well.

Available information demonstrates that ASW degrees as a group do not misrepresent or misappropriate social work education. Theorists can reflect on who rightly delimits social work education or its defining characteristics. It is premature to recommend any changes to social work practice or policy based on the discovery of associate degree programs in social work. Employers can consider or recruit ASW graduates for entry-level jobs. The regeneration of relationships between CSWE and community colleges must await a clearer understanding of these ASW programs. The advisability of social work education at community colleges cannot yet be determined, however; further qualitative and quantitative research into their nature,
outcomes, and quality is needed. Let it be collaborative. ASW program directors and faculty can be vital partners in the exploration of program goals, student and faculty member experiences, curricula, trends over time, inter-program variety, and community colleges’ limitations. While these programs may appear as a New World to the social work establishment, they represent a long-inhabited continent, no doubt with its own histories, cultures, people, and successes.
Appendix: U.S. colleges offering associate degrees in social work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Name</th>
<th>City, State</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athens Technical College</td>
<td>Athens, GA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bergen Community College</td>
<td>Paramus, NJ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Big Bend Community College</td>
<td>Moses Lake, WA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brookdale Community College</td>
<td>Lincroft, NJ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cecil College</td>
<td>North East, MD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chattanooga State Community College</td>
<td>Chattanooga, TN</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clark State Community College</td>
<td>Springfield, OH</td>
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<tr>
<td>College of Lake County</td>
<td>Grayslake, IL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colorado Mountain College</td>
<td>Glenwood Springs, CO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community College of Allegheny County</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community College of Denver</td>
<td>Denver, CO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connors State College</td>
<td>Warner, OK</td>
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<tr>
<td>Del Mar College</td>
<td>Corpus Christi, TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delaware County Community College</td>
<td>Media, PA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern Iowa Community Colleges</td>
<td>Davenport, IA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastfield College</td>
<td>Mesquite, TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>El Paso Community College</td>
<td>El Paso, TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grand Rapids Community College</td>
<td>Grand Rapids, MI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heartland Community College</td>
<td>Normal, IL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hudson County Community College</td>
<td>Jersey City, NJ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hutchinson Community College</td>
<td>Hutchinson, KS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iowa Central Community College</td>
<td>Fort Dodge, IA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jones County Junior College</td>
<td>Ellisville, MS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kansas City Kansas Community College</td>
<td>Kansas City, KS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Macomb Community College</td>
<td>Warren, MI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manchester Community College</td>
<td>Manchester, CT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Community College</td>
<td>Omaha, NE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miami Dade College</td>
<td>Miami, FL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mott Community College</td>
<td>Flint, MI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nashville State Community College</td>
<td>Nashville, TN</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>Location</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Idaho College</td>
<td>Couer d'Alene, ID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shoreline Community College</td>
<td>Shoreline, WA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northhampton Community College</td>
<td>Bethlehem, PA</td>
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<td>Sinclair Community College</td>
<td>Dayton, OH</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northwestern Michigan College</td>
<td>Traverse City, MI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snead State Community College</td>
<td>Boaz, AL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Owens Community College</td>
<td>Perrysburg, OH</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Texas College</td>
<td>McAllen, TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palo Alto College</td>
<td>San Antonio, TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Maine Community College</td>
<td>South Portland, ME</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pierpont Community &amp; Technical College</td>
<td>Fairmont, WV</td>
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<tr>
<td>Texas Southmost College</td>
<td>Brownsville, TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prairie State College</td>
<td>Chicago Heights, IL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Triton College</td>
<td>River Grove, IL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pueblo Community College</td>
<td>Pueblo, CO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tulsa Community College</td>
<td>Tulsa, OK</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raritan Valley Community College</td>
<td>Branchburg, NJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler Junior College</td>
<td>Tyler, TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rio Hondo College</td>
<td>Whittier, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walters State College</td>
<td>Morristown, TN</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rowan College at Gloucester County</td>
<td>Sewell, NJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne County Community College</td>
<td>Detroit, MI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salt Lake Community College</td>
<td>Salt Lake City, UT</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Va. Northern Community College</td>
<td>Wheeling, WV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Antonio College</td>
<td>San Antonio, TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego City College</td>
<td>San Diego, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Fe College</td>
<td>Gainesville, FL</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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Factors Leading to the Exclusion of Community Colleges from CSWE:
Lessons in the History of Community Colleges and Social Work Education

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Abstract

Despite community colleges’ expressed interest in offering social work education they were never able to gain approval from the discipline’s accrediting body. Archival evidence, analyzed through a critical pedagogy framework, suggests that wariness of vocational education, distrust of paraprofessionals, social work leaders’ desire to project a professional image, and a lack of external pressure impeded the acceptance and accreditation of Associate in Social Work degrees by the Council on Social Work Education. This history offers lessons for all community college programs: community colleges must create access for upward transfer; doing so requires organization, advocacy, and connections with gatekeepers; and stakeholders must take responsibility for conducting original research and publishing results to address others’ concerns and highlight their programs’ advantages.

*Keywords:* CSWE, social work education, community colleges, associate degree, accreditation, archival
Following are the slides used for a paper presentation at the 60th annual conference of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, on April 28, 2018, in Dallas, Texas. That gathering provided the first occasion to share the research into social work education at community colleges detailed in Products One and Two, thereby becoming the first scholarly venue for this topic in decades. Conference attendees were the first to hear results of new qualitative historical research and its synthesis with secondary published accounts: (1) to protect wages and status, CSWE sought to “professionalize” its workforce in the mid-twentieth century; (2) social work leaders and governmental bodies alike demonstrated ambivalence about the skills and employability of people living in poverty; and, (3) community colleges failed to organize or align themselves with social work.

The brief time allotted for this presentation (15 to 20 minutes) necessitated a narrow scope, with a careful focus on audience members’ potential applications for the findings. Despite the importance of ground-breaking information about social work education—including the existence of 57 contemporary social work associate degree programs—attendees sought useful lessons for their concerns, unrelated to social work. This need dictated a focus on universal lessons for all professional and technical degree programs; the ASW provided a case study for all community college interests.

For the sake of audience engagement, as the first presentation on the conference’s final day, most historical information was conveyed through storytelling, using handheld objects and visual images more so than on-screen text or numerical results. Consequently, the purpose of some slides may not be self-evident. Images such as those of historical and contemporary student bodies were used to evoke consideration of issues and highlight themes when shown during the discussion of my research findings. Attendee feedback would later validate these decisions.
Lessons in the history of community colleges and social work education

Rex Rempel, MSW, LICSW

20th century social work

photo credit: University of Tennessee
The split

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

ACREDITED BY THE COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

My research

Why did CSWE choose not to admit community colleges and accredit associates degrees in social work?
Those impacted

- community colleges
- cc students
- social work
- society

recruitment has been from the middle class and white-collar, middle-management jobs. This suggests a relatively highly educated, middle-class workforce that has most likely never personally experienced poverty associated with objects and people.
class, deferred gratification? How less verbal lower-class person

The split

Human services
Community colleges
Open admission
Poor, minority, disadvantaged
Paraprofessionals
Direct service
Any degree level

Social work
Universities
Competitive admnsn.
White, middle-class
Professionals
Clinical
MSW or BSW
Accredited social work ed

PhD / DSW

MSW

Bachelors in Social Work

Associates in Social Work

Lessons for cc

*External* pathways deserve our attention, too
Lessons for cc

Inclusion may require organization and advocacy

Lessons for cc

It is our responsibility to join the conversation and tell our story
Thank you

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