

CHAPTER 4: DIVERSITY AND JUSTICE



*Social Work students
prepare for Student Day at
the Legislature, 2011*

Practicing in a Diverse Society While Enhancing Human Rights and Justice

Building a Nondiscriminatory Explicit Curriculum

In September 2011, Texas State received a \$3.4 million federal grant related to its HSI status, a grant which will provide scholarships for 50 Hispanic students for several years. The University has other HIS-related grants under consideration.

The School of Social Work's explicit curriculum educates skilled social workers prepared to practice in a dynamic, diverse social environment, and to be leaders for change in a global era. While weaving diversity content into each course, the School also offers a BSW course specific to this topic: SOWK 4310 Diversity and Social Justice.



EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.4—Engage diversity and

difference in practice. Social workers understand how diversity characterizes and shapes the human experience and is critical to the formation of identity. The dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status,

political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation. Social workers appreciate that, as a consequence of difference, a person's life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization, and alienation as well as privilege, power, and acclaim. Social workers

- recognize the extent to which a culture's structures and values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance privilege and power;
- gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse groups;
- recognize and communicate their understanding of the importance of difference in shaping life experiences; and
- view themselves as learners and engage those with whom they work as informants.

Students in SOWK 3420 Practice I have a “disability” lab exercise in which they ride in wheelchairs and try to access spaces like restrooms. They are blindfolded to simulate blindness and try to move from building to building. They learn a lot about the reality of having a “disability”.



EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.5—Advance human rights and social and economic justice. Each person, regardless of position in society, has basic human rights, such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Social workers recognize the global interconnections of oppression and are knowledgeable about theories of justice and strategies to promote human and civil rights. Social work incorporates social

justice practices in organizations, institutions, and society to ensure that these basic human rights are distributed equitably and without prejudice. Social workers

- understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination;
- advocate for human rights and social and economic justice; and
- engage in practices that advance social and economic justice.

Context and Opportunities

Texas State University, an Hispanic-Serving Institution, has a student population that is approximately 35% Hispanic. Within the School, our student population of color is approximately 35%, with the majority of those individuals being Hispanic. Our BSW student population is primarily female, and while many are of traditional college age, a sizeable portion are more mature and experienced than traditional students. Many of our students openly claim to be religious, but in class discussion, they vary dramatically in their beliefs. We have a significant number of student veterans in our program. So students live in a diverse society on campus.

The school sponsors events and guest speakers to which students come and receive class credit. For instance, Dr. Deepak and students from the school organized a university-wide event on Islamophobia at which Dr. Deepak discussed Islamophobia and a panel of students and faculty members presented their personal experiences. For the last three years, the Director of the Center for the Elimination of Racial Disparities at the Texas State Department of Health and Human Services has spoken to students about her ground-breaking work in combating racial disproportionality in child welfare. Students have also heard presentations on how to work with families in poverty and how a Mississippi community, led by an interfaith groups, rebuilt black churches after racially-motivated burnings.

Social work students have played a key role in leading a university-wide student group called Interruptions, a multi-racial, anti-racism peer education group which aims to educate the Texas State community about racism and anti-racism. The Organization of Student Social Workers (OSSW) sponsors lectures by faculty members for students and actively seek out lectures on topics related to diversity and social justice. In the past two years, OSSW has asked Dr. Travis to speak on his research on Hip Hop and Positive Youth Development, Dr. Deepak to speak on Globalization, Food and Small Farmers, and an alumni to speak about his work as a Spanish bilingual social worker.

The University Center for Multicultural and Gender Studies sponsors the Multicultural Curriculum Transformation Institute every summer. Faculty from throughout the university apply to attend this intensive training in which faculty learn to transform course content and instructional methods to intentionally highlight multicultural learning and transcend cultural boundaries. Eight of our School faculty have gone through this experience to transform eight courses.

The School sponsors multicultural events for students. For instance, the School organized a university-wide event on Islamophobia at which Dr. Deepak and a panel of students and faculty spoke. For the last three years, students have heard from the Director of the Center for the Elimination of Racial Disparities about combating racial disproportionality in child welfare. Students have also heard from speakers on how poverty affects families and communities, and how interfaith groups in Mississippi rebuilt black churches after racially-motivated burnings.

Diverse Contextual Issues that Make Us Unique

Students explore, through assigned readings, lectures, class discussions, group exercises, and written assignments, many contextual issues that make each human being unique. Such contextual issues, many of which are accidents of birth, include but are not limited to age and generation, ethnicity and race, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation and behavior, physical and mental abilities, religion or creed, geographical region of origin, socioeconomic level and social class, body characteristics, speech patterns and original language, family structure, and place of residence. These are potent factors which shape a person's identity and may affect opportunities—to the extent that some of these factors (such as poverty) are statistically linked with at-risk indicators. To meet our mission, we must educate students on these factors, because we are preparing them to work with the most vulnerable populations.

Students learn to appreciate the many ways these various factors can combine to make a unique individual. They learn to avoid assuming that various factors (such as sexual orientation and body type) are always connected. Because the faculty intentionally return to these contextual issues in every course, students have ample opportunity to examine and appreciate their own contextual factors. They learn to recognize the ways they respond to contextual factors in other people. Students come to understand that people's contextual factors may affect the power and acceptance they have in society. They come to honor other people's diversity, and to acquire skills they need to deliver services in fair ways. Students are prompted to think innovatively about creating a more just world while empowering those who are marginalized and desperate.

The School teaches students that this fight for social and economic justice is worthy of personal effort and professional vigor. It is one that will require life-long vigilance and engagement. This endeavor begins at home in our School, where we try to be vigilant against any policy or custom that inhibits our celebration of diversity or our intent to be fair and just.

In 2010, in response to student feedback and faculty consideration, the School made SOWK 4310 Diversity and Social Justice a required core course for BSW majors. Current students at that time submitted a petition to include more diversity content in the curriculum, and graduates reported on exit surveys that they wish they had learned more diversity content. Faculty responded by moving SOWK 4310 from elective status to required status.

Drs. Hill Jones, Knox, and Garcia Biggs secured several Hartford Foundation grants on the topic of gerontology a few years ago. The School had a day-long retreat, in which they taught faculty how to infuse gerontology content into all courses in the curriculum. That material is still evident in our courses.

We discuss diversity from the strengths perspective, so students can recognize strengths in themselves and in others, and can fight for a more just world. We also teach students that it is human nature to gravitate toward those people who are “like” us in contextual factors, and that broadening our acceptance of people who differ from us involves incremental, sometimes long-term processes of change and adaptation. Since the School focuses on developing future public servants and leaders, we are particularly interested in building tolerance for diversity and preparing students to deliver fair services and craft policies that promote justice.

Helping Students Develop Self-Awareness

Students begin the diversity learning process by looking inward. Our faculty create safe learning environments in which students can analyze their own worldviews through activities such as the following.

- Students in **SOWK 4425 Practice III** complete a workbook assignment in which they explore their families of origin and life experiences. They complete a genogram, ecomap, and timeline to understand the various relationships and experiences in their lives that have shaped their personal perspectives.
- During the practice skills development labs in **SOWK 4425**, students work hands-on in simulated client situations. One student worked with a “pregnant teen”, and came to realize that she had a value conflict when providing the “client” with all available options around how the client handled her pregnancy. The student said after the experience that she never realized she had such a deep value conflict, but “I now see how my values can come through when working with clients”.
- Students in **SOWK 4310 Diversity and Social Justice** keep a journal to process their emotional and intellectual responses to the course content. Four times during the semester, the instructor responds to these journals, giving students a safe place to honestly deal with difficult issues and build self-awareness.

Recognize and Communicate How Differences Can Shape Lives

Our School consciously works to encourage students, faculty, staff, and field staff to appreciate the broad range of diversity we bring to the table—and by extension, to affirm diversity in the broader society. Here are examples.

- ✓ In **SOWK 3420 Practice I**, undergraduates view and discuss the film *Color of Fear*, which discusses privilege and racism. They also participate in a disability exercise in which they become “disabled” by negotiating campus in a wheelchair, or finding their way around while blindfolded, or other simulated experiences of limited senses or mobility. This creates a real opportunity to examine their own responses to people of different abilities.

Eight of our courses are classified as “multi-cultural” by the university. This means they have been transformed to highlight multi-cultural content.

- ✓ **SOWK 3340 Research** prompts undergraduates to think through how professional ethics relate to diverse people who are subject of research. They strategize about how to conduct research in ways that respect people of all contextual factors.
- ✓ **SOWK 4310 Diversity and Social Justice** deals in depth with the role of diverse groups in society. Students write about their personal ethnic identification, how they describe that group’s strengths, and what meanings the group carries for them. They also forecast how they think their group identification will affect their professional careers.
- ✓ Faculty in **SOWK 4356 Professionalism** challenge undergraduates to be aware of how they respond to diverse groups, including clients, colleagues, and administrators. Students conduct a group exercise in which various ones must be a “minority” in terms of contextual factors, and report back to the group.
- ✓ The School operates (with the Modern Languages Department) a unique **Intensive Spanish Language Institute (ISLI)** that prepares non-Spanish-speaking BSW students to speak at least “survival Spanish”. Students apply for the ISLI and are screened for general academic success and foreign language proficiency. Once admitted, students spend 3.5 hours per day, 5 days a week for 12 weeks in the Institute. They study Spanish grammar and vocabulary that social workers generally need in practice. After spending 75% of their class time speaking in Spanish and making oral reports in Spanish on social work issues and interviewing clients of community agencies in Spanish, students become nominally conversant in the language. This experience allows them to fulfill their 14-semester-credit-hour foreign language requirement for the BSW.
- ✓ Students in **SOWK 4305 HBSE II** analyze case scenarios, assessing how diversity affects clients’ bio-psycho-social-spiritual development. They also apply assessment skills by suggesting services to meet the needs of diverse clients.

Students in 4310 Diversity contacted local College and Career Counselors in local school districts to give them information on the Dream Act to pass on to high school students.

The Link Between Culture and Power

Once students have developed self-awareness about their values and biases, faculty prompt them to learn the links between power and justice, and to study the relationship between contextual factors, the structure of the dominant culture, and the ways people may be included in or excluded from social opportunities. Students identify instances of institutional privilege and oppression. In classes, they develop strategies to empower clients through such activities as these.

- ✓ In **SOWK 1350 Introduction**, students watch movies and are prompted to assess situations of injustice and how people make society more fair.
- ✓ Students in **SOWK 3305 HBSE I** use social and economic justice as a standard by which to assess social system functioning. They compare social class and cultures of various socioeconomic groups with standards of tolerance and justice.

Thinking of One's Self as a Learner

Two students arranged interviews with women's rights advocates on a local radio station to profile their social programs which aid women.

Students in 4310 Diversity created a human-sized poster with the phrase "People Should Be Priceless" to display on campus with information on human trafficking and how to combat it.

We prompt students to value life-long learning as a way to continue to grow in cultural competence. We encourage them to think of others as informants about culture. Our courses provide numerous assignments that allow students to exchange world views with one another and learn to honor other people's contextual factors.

- ✓ Students in **SOWK 3420 Practice I** engage in an Immersion/Emersion project which requires them to interact with people who are members of cultures different from their own. They thereby develop empathy and learn from others' life stories.
- ✓ Students in **SOWK 4425 Practice III** engage in a "Multi-cultural Inquiry" assignment in which they interview someone who is different from them, using culturally educated questioning. They learn about different cultures and what it would be like to work with that culture.
- ✓ In **4356 Professionalism**, students perform an interdisciplinary role play in which, for example, they act out a high school staffing for an at-risk Hispanic student. Students play various roles, such as the Latina "mother" who is learning English and is a recent immigrant. The student who recently played the mother said afterwards, "I never realized how intimidating this situation would be, or how uncertain the mother would be about how to help her son. I want to make sure I never do this to my clients."
- ✓ Students in **4310 Diversity and Social Justice** create diversity group presentations to an imaginary social service agency. Students immerse themselves in learning about the population they have been assigned, such as Somali immigrant youth. Students must search for academic research as well as cultural reflections of the population group, such as youtubes, music, websites, in order to understand their perspectives.

Advancing Human Rights and Social Justice

The School believes that every person has basic human rights, such as safety, freedom, and privacy, as well as adequate standards of living, health care, and education. We recognize that oppression crosses national borders, and we want our students to recognize those global interconnections and think about strategies to advance rights and justice. In fact, the 2010-2011 theme for Texas State's Common Experience (a campus-wide yearly study of a specific topic which is reflected in many campus events and recommended readings for all students) was Globalization.

Texas State University has developed a university-wide committee to enhance the global perspective of our university. The School of Social Work is involved in that effort, in which we particularly focus on the issues of human rights and sustainability. Our students are taught about the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and various subsequent treaties. We teach content on human rights throughout the curriculum, but we focus this content on the elective **SOWK 3339 Selected Topics on International Social Work**. This

A group of students worked with a Women's Center to support their Adopt-a-Family for the Holidays. They also collected money and secured toys and school supplies to send to the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan.

course is predicated on the model of "global citizenship", which moves beyond cultural competence and implies an obligation to be a good citizen. The model further stressed human rights literacy (basic knowledge), human rights empathy (concern for others), and human rights responsibility (action for change). Students complete a semester project exploring a human rights problem, strategizing about solutions.

Over the last few years, the School has sponsored several study abroad trips to Mexico, Cambodia, England, and India. Several of our faculty, including Drs. Catherine Hawkins, Anne Deepak, Karen Knox, and Betsy Wisner, have presented at national and international meetings on issues of human rights. They bring that material back to class. In fact, several students have been involved in their research. Three years ago, the School engaged in a faculty exchange with faculty in India. In both the International Social Work elective and in the Diversity course, students have created notable projects on such topics as world hunger, human trafficking, women's rights, and environmental sustainability. Currently Dr. Hawkins is on Faculty Developmental Leave working on a project studying human trafficking.

Field students also work in settings throughout the Austin-San Antonio corridor where human rights and social justice are paramount. Over 90% of our field agency partners are public or non-profit agencies. Our bilingual students are in particularly high demand in such settings as Dell Children's Hospital.

- ✓ The School's largest partners are Child Protective Services (CPS) and Communities in Schools (CSI), both of which have major social justice initiatives. For instance, our students have worked with the Gay-Straight Alliance in CIS, as well as Girls' Empowerment program.
- ✓ Caritas is an agency in which students work a great deal with refugees, and there are other agencies where our students intern that give them experience with immigrants and refugees.
- ✓ Students at The Haven for Hope advocate for the homeless including health, meals, education, and housing resources.
- ✓ Any Baby Can serves chronically ill and disabled children, and students placed in neonatal intensive care services at a San Antonio hospital also work with children who have developmental and health challenges.
- ✓ The Center for P-16 Initiative G-Force Mentor program provides college mentors for students from "high risk" populations, specifically targeting first generation college students at the middle and high school levels.
- ✓ The Hays Caldwell Women's Center provides emergency shelters and services promoting healing and independence for women with children who are victims of domestic violence.
- ✓ Lifeworks helps clients deal with many life issues such as substance abuse, education, and domestic discord by providing services that emphasize human rights and address social justice in agencies.
- ✓ Students intern with the Travis County Attorney's Office disproportionality specialist.
- ✓ We have students interning with some of the poorest urban school districts in the state, such as Edgewood ISD on San Antonio's west side.