



CHAPTER 7:
POLICY



*Clockwise: Jerry McKimmey, Betsy Wisner); Amy Benton;
Angela Ausbrooks; Catherine Hawkins (left) and Kathy
Selber (right)*

Chapter

7

Policy: Shaping Services and Influencing Attitudes

Crafting Leadership for Effective BSW Policy Practice

“Doing what’s right isn’t the problem. It’s knowing what’s right.”
--Lyndon B. Johnson

We teach our students that policy is a critical component of building and delivering effective, ethical services and advocating for social change. Policy practice is a critical skill for social workers that expands over all competencies, including engaging diversity and difference, professionalism and ethical conduct, and advancing human rights and social and economic justice



EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.8—Engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services. Social work practitioners understand that policy affects service delivery, and they actively engage in policy practice. Social workers know the history and current structures of social policies and services; the role of policy in service delivery; and the role of practice in policy development. Social workers

- analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance social well-being; and
- collaborate with colleagues and clients for effective policy action.

Our policy content also supports EP 2.1.5 Advance Human Rights and Social and Economic Justice. Because the School of Social Work at Texas State is committed to producing social work leaders, the realm of policy is central. Policy shapes services and influences attitudes. As Freeman and Sherwood said in their classic work *Social Research and Social Policy* (Prentice Hall, 1970), policy provides four important directions for professionals:

- ❖ Policy is a **philosophical concept** whereby society seeks enduring solutions to problems.
- ❖ Policy is a **product**. It consists of the conclusions that people reach to ameliorate social disorganization and may well be committed formally to paper.

**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY-SAN MARCOS, 2011**

At the 2011 Student Day at the Legislature, a group of students and faculty met with Sen. Whitmire's staff. They discussed a controversial guns-on-campus bill before the Legislature. Whitmire's staff called the School the following day to tell us how impressed they were with our students' knowledge of the topic, and with how articulate and clear our students were in expressing their ideas.

- ❖ Policy is a **process**, one by which social organizations maintain some stability while still seeking to improve conditions. In this light, policy is always changing and adapting to social conditions; it is never finished.
- ❖ Policy as both a product and a process provides a **framework for action**, guiding people to implement agreed-upon changes.

In our policy sequence, the School addresses all four definitions of policy. We embrace policy as an arena of practice, with its own skills and knowledge. Policy studies and activities not only call for finely-tuned critical thinking skills, but they demand that professionals build bridges with other disciplines to accomplish goals. Those goals, interwoven with our allegiance to values, are linked to our commitment to build a more just society.

Social workers who make effective policy practice their professional home base must be:

- ✗ skilled in clear, persuasive oral and written communication;
- ✗ cognizant of the structures and procedures of policy-making bodies;
- ✗ creative and divergent in their thinking about how to solve problems and negotiate policy-making systems;
- ✗ able to develop "people skills" of openness and cooperation and mutuality;
- ✗ able to research and critically analyze the nuances of social issues;
- ✗ competent to evaluate the outcomes of policies; and
- ✗ ready to think futuristically about the intended and unintended consequences of policy decisions.

We encourage students to develop critical thinking skills throughout our curriculum, but those skills are particularly pertinent to policy. Critical thinking involves asking questions, understanding the facts and issues of a topic, and moving toward an informed conclusion.

Working with social policy is an exciting task that stretches professionals to develop negotiation skills, entrepreneurial approaches to problems, and willingness to accommodate to policy modification. It is not an area for people who are rigid and unyielding. Because policy work requires flexibility, it is an area in which practitioners can easily slide into dishonesty: persuasion becomes manipulation, and accommodation translates into abandoning core values. Consequently, as we teach students to be policy practitioners, we must also teach them to vigilantly guard their commitment to values and ethics, to continually stoke the fires of their passion to serve the disadvantaged, to remain sensitive to instruction and supervision from their professional colleagues, and to build bridges of cooperation rather than destroy them.

Our undergraduate students prepare themselves for the complex study of policy by taking a range of liberal arts courses and supportive social science courses, including history, political science, government, and economics. We lace content on social policy throughout our curriculum, but we focus policy content in these courses:

- ✗ **SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community** is a pre-policy course in which undergraduates learn the history of social welfare policy, and get a broad overview of current social welfare system. They examine social

service organizations and policies. Students volunteer in selected agencies as supervised observers and volunteers, delving first-hand into how policy affects service delivery.

- ✘ **SOWK 3350 Connecting Policy and Practice** bridges content in policy, HBSE, and practice. It expands content on dealing with vulnerable, often involuntary, clients\ client groups and deepens understanding of how policy and practice link together.
- ✘ **SOWK 4355 Policy Practice** surveys social policy and legislation, highlighting how social workers can influence policy and legislation in a wide variety of service areas. Students gain a more robust understanding of how policy and practice are integrated.

Students in SOWK 4355 have a profound learning experience when they hear about current drug policies from a former narcotics officer and undercover DEA agent, who happens to be married to a social work faculty member. He leads students in a mock drug court session.

Policy courses build policy knowledge in an orderly manner. For instance, undergraduates in SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community learn a basic critical thinking framework for policy analysis and apply it to current policy issues. They use the Triple A and the 5 E approach found in the required Kirst-Ashmon text to investigate current pieces of legislation. Building on that basic analysis, SOWK 4355 Policy Practice students select legislation, track it, and write a paper to analyze the policy issues involved.

Content about policy is also integrated into other elements of the curriculum. For instance, students in our practice courses deal with policies (such as HIV disease confidentiality laws), and examine how services are expanded or constricted by policy decisions. They ponder how practitioners are affected by policy decisions. In our research courses, students review the fundamental logic and limitations of cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses, evaluation techniques that are profoundly important for developing and evaluating policy.

Knowing Where We Have Been

The foundation for policy work is the history of our profession, a study rich with learning opportunities. Though other areas of our curriculum touch on historical occurrences, it is in the policy sequence that we examine the intertwined history of the profession and of social welfare services as a “base line”, so that we can compare and contrast the events of today. We need to know where we have been to know where we are going.

- Students in **SOWK 1350 Introduction to Social Work** learn about the history of the profession, and how advocacy developed as a professional social work skill. They view videos on Jane Addams and the Hull House movement as an example of the roots of advocacy. They view videos about and discuss other social welfare movements.
- **SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community** students learn how social welfare policy has developed in this country, building on knowledge of the history of social work that they learned in SOWK 1350 Introduction to Social Work. They view videos on the history of American social work. Students do a critical thinking assignment. They examine a current policy issue such as privatizing social security, examining the issues involved in light of the history of the social security system. This involves some comparison and contrast with the social security systems of other nations.

The daughter of
State Rep.
Donna Howard
(D-Austin) is a
Texas State BSW
major. Rep.
Howard says that
Texas State is the
“It” university in
the state—it is
growing and
making an
impact on the
state.

We want
students to know
that
administrative
law and
professional
regulation are
quite important
in shaping how
policies work.
We refer
students to the
Secretary of State
website to learn
about the Texas
Administrative
Code.

- **SOWK 4355 Policy Practice** students consider the history of each policy issue the course covers. For example, students must understand the history of AFDC in order to understand the trajectory that led to TANF.

Knowing How Policy Works

Social workers must grasp that policy is pivotal to service design and implementation. Policy is to service delivery as environment is to human behavior: without a supportive policy environment, professionals cannot adequately deliver services which foster social well-being, just as a supportive environment is crucial to fostering healthy development and productive behavior. Consequently, we reinforce that because policy and services are intertwined, effective practitioners must understand policy and be committed to altering policy for the benefit of clients and society.

We also emphasize the key role of making the rules that implement laws. Social workers often discuss how critical it is to influence the legislative process. Many social workers, however, fail to give the same emphasis to the rules-making process, and that is an arena in which social workers can contribute a great deal. Social workers need to read new laws and participate in public hearings and public comment opportunities to influence how laws are actually implemented. We discuss with students the fact that original wording and even intent of the law can be substantially altered in the rules-making process. That process is overseen by public agencies and entities, and we need to be vitally involved in shaping implementation rules.

Here are examples of how we teach students to understand the nature of policy and the policy-making process.

- ✗ Students in **SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community** volunteer to work in agencies, and then report back to the class about their experiences. This beginning experience introduces them to how policy shapes services.
- ✗ **SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community** students study a scenario in which they must develop policy concepts for a new civilization. Faculty lead them through an exercise that helps them understand how social welfare policies are created based on the person’s ideology and values.
- ✗ Students in **SOWK 3425 Practice II** are required to attend a public meeting of a policy-making body, such as a city council or county commissioner’s meeting. They see up-front the processes and maneuvering that takes place in policy-making.
- ✗ In **4356 Professionalism**, students learn about the Texas Code of Conduct and discuss actual cases of professional misconduct. They consider how these professionals implement policy and how they respond to situations in which policies create ethical dilemmas for social workers.
- ✗ The School has placed students at all levels in internships with the offices of various state legislators. We have also placed students in agencies that deal with advocacy, policy, and/or legislation, such as Disability Rights Texas, Texas Freedom Network, Texas Network of Youth Services, and various police and district attorneys offices.

Understanding the Complexity of Policy

Social policy is complex in nature and process. Students' liberal arts foundation and supportive social science classes give them a great deal of information to understand the complexity of policy work. We give students the basic tools to understand policy and to investigate policy decisions. For instance:

- Texas State School of Social Work typically has the largest attendance of any Texas university at Student Day at the Legislature; in 2011, we sent 90 students to Austin. Faculty dismiss class and hold students accountable for reporting back on this educational experience. Students meet with elected officials to discuss public policy and spend time in the House and Senate watching legislators in action. The Texas Legislature meets bi-annually for 140 days, so students learn that much legislative work governing a state of over 22 million people is done outside of the official session.
- Students get an international perspective on policy in **SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community** when faculty present sessions on immigration issues. Beginning with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, faculty trace relationships between Texas and Mexico through the Mexican American war, through the birth of the Border Patrol, to the current chaos of immigration policy. Students complete an exercise that leads them to consider the concept of white privilege. They discuss how some social welfare policies institutionalize discrimination.

Steve Medel,
Clinical Lecturer,
recently invited
Nancy Walker,
LMSW, to speak
to students in
SOWK 4355.
She is Chief of
Staff for a state
representative,
and discussed
how social
workers can
affect legislative
policy, and how
important social
issues are in
legislation.

Analyzing Issues

We give our students tools to assess the issues that bring some policy concerns to the forefront of social consciousness, while leaving other issues hidden. Students need to know how to investigate policy issues, discriminating between accurate and inaccurate sources of information, while also comparing responses to policy issues in different jurisdictions. They also make the connection between how policy issues and practice issues are intertwined.

Though we anticipate that the policy changes for which we advocate will positively effect clients and client systems, every policy also has a negative component. We want students to forecast the unanticipated consequences and think proactively about how to address those consequences. This futuristic thinking requires students to think divergently and creatively.

- Undergraduates in **SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community** learn the basics of analyzing social welfare issues. They study issues such as how to manage Medicare in view of the burgeoning elderly population. Working in groups, they think critically about the issue, identify possible policy solutions, and present their analysis and policy solution to the class.
- Undergraduates in **SOWK 4355 Policy Practice** are required to locate and present information about a current policy issue through research the Internet, blogs, TV, and other news sources. The resulting discussions are lively.

Building Policy Practice Skills

Effective policy practice requires knowledge about existing policies and policy options, a complicated and ever-changing landscape. Policy practice also calls for creative thinking and the ability to network with many different people—as well as determination and persistence. So effective policy practitioners must be dedicated students of the policy arena, they must have significant people-skills, and they must be committed to making policy work for the benefit of clients.

Our School believes that social workers should be about the business of righting social wrongs and creating a more just society. It is insufficient and futile to mouth moral imperatives if we are not giving students the tools to make those moral imperatives come to fruition for clients and client groups. We must be accountable for our policy actions as social workers; this is crucial to the public trust as we prepare students to be public servants.

- ✘ **SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community** students learn about policy practice and policy advocacy by in-class lectures and exercises, as well as participating in Student Day at the Legislature. Students also listen to a selection of pop music, written with advocacy in mind. Faculty guide student to analyze the tone of the selections and discuss how tone affects how those in power, as well as the general public, receive the message.
- ✘ Students reach **SOWK 4355 Policy Practice** actually participating in the legislative process by identifying and selecting a bill, tracking and analyzing it, and assessing how the bill affects clients.
- ✘ In **SOWK 2375 and 4355**, various elected officials discuss how social workers and students can take an active role in running for office. Sherri Tibbe, Hays County's first female District Attorney, and Christopher Jones, a San Marcos City Councilman, are examples of guest speakers who discuss public office as a way of influencing policy.
- ✘ In our policy classes, we emphasize that one of the most effective and under-used ways that social workers can make a policy impact is to be involved in making the rules that implement laws. We encourage them to track relevant bills that are passed, identify opportunities for public comment, and participate in that process by committing their comments to writing and submitting those comments. For instance, when the rules implementing the Texas social work regulatory law were overhauled in 2010, the period of public comment drew only about 130 comments—though those rules affect more than 20,000 social workers. Consequently, the impact of those few comments were heightened because there were so few of them.

Linking Policy and Values

Values influence how we perceive social problems, and values shape policy responses to problems. Students must examine how consistent policies are with our professional values. Policy is extremely susceptible to biases and social pressures, and it frequently ends up being at odds with values that social workers hold dear. Faculty work with students to surmount roadblocks to policy changes, to work around them, or to stimulate enough pressure to encourage changes in the power structure. In order to do this effectively, students must be sensitive to the fact that prejudice is often inherent in lack of education and

Policy students
in SOWK 4355
recently
convened their
class on the lawn
of the state
capital to
participate in
Occupy Austin.
They prepared
for this event by
studying policies
that affect
income for
Americans, and
the event
generated much
fruitful
discussion.

knowledge. We must educate ourselves and policy makers about the realities that affect our clients and client groups in order to overcome prejudice.

Students love to attend Student Day at the Legislature, where Texas State typically has the largest contingent. Students rally on the front steps of the Capitol about policy issues that excite them. In 2011, we took about 100 students and 11 faculty to Austin.

- Undergraduates in **SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community** learn about the value systems that underlie policy responses to social problems. They complete a paper examining the social values that shape the agency in which they are volunteering and how the agency incorporates professional values into agency policy. They compare those societal and professional values with their personal values. Additionally, students read articles from news sources and analyze them using critical thinking skills and the Code of Ethics. Students discuss their impressions from the articles of how important social policy is, and how social workers can affect society through policy.
- Undergraduates in **SOWK 3350 Connecting Policy and Practice** compare their personal values with society's values by learning about economically disadvantaged clients, involuntary clients, and diverse people. They focus on ways to humanize policies for such clients.
- In our policy classes, we examine major social policy changes, such as healthcare, Medicare, and TANF. We look at the effects these changes have on the most vulnerable populations. Students hear about heroes in social work, like Jane Addams, who was committed to disadvantaged, vulnerable people, and are inspired by these heroes.
- We encourage our students to be reasonable and sensible about policy, balancing their policy aspirations with winnable goals and flexible methods. Students need to learn a multitude of skills, including wheeling and dealing, negotiating and compromising, being assertive and using power, persuading and convincing, and educating and informing. They must tolerate uncertainty in policy and be flexible enough to make quick changes in strategy, and they need to learn to advocate effectively.
- Students in policy classes address lobbying. We often invite active lobbyists, such as lobbyists for professional associations, to speak to our students about this avenue of persuasion.
- We encourage students to be involved in political campaigns, discussing ways to make their voices heard—not the least of which is voting
- We also encourage students to consider running for political office themselves, from local offices to larger-scale offices. This political involvement is entirely consistent with our School's mission of preparing public servants and preparing Leaders for Change.
- Another way that students can be involved in policy is to serve on agency or professional boards, and we discuss the opportunities for these activities.
- One challenge of dealing with policy and values is allowing all people to discuss their divergent views without fear of being shamed or discounted. Faculty are careful to be discriminating about sharing their own socio-political views, and in giving all students a chance to express even unpopular ideas.

Linking Policy and Delivery Systems

Organizational and budget implications have a significant impact on policy and service delivery. We want our students to be able to “follow the money” and

One of our faculty's spouse is chief-of-staff for Rep. Sephronia Thompson (D-Houston). She spent almost two hours with our students at the 2011 Student Day at the Legislature, talking about immigration and human trafficking issues.

make rational, practical decisions about how realistic policies are, given organizational and budgetary restraints.

In our School, we try not to expend much energy arguing about whether social work should be primarily clinical or primarily policy-driven. We think social workers must be knowledgeable about and comfortable with the total professional picture, which includes both clinical issues and administrative/policy concerns. Students in this School learn that policy and practice are married to each other, and it is not practical to divorce these elements. Front-line practitioners must feed policy-shapers the information necessary to make intelligent policy decisions.

- Undergraduates in **SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community** work in agencies as volunteers. They product an Agency Report in which they explore their agency's mission statement, goals, services, funding sources, and organizational structure. They learn how deeply policy and financial constraints affect service delivery.
- In **SOWK 3350 Connecting Policy and Practice**, students look at discrimination and social stigma, exploring the frequent disconnect between a client's needs and the services that are actually provided. They put themselves in the place of clients and imagine what it would be like to be a client.
- Students in **SOWK 4355 Policy Practice** study how a specific policy or legislation, applying a four-part detailed analysis of the political, economic, and administrative feasibility of the policy. They learn that policy is linked to social work's core values, particularly social justice.
- Budgeting for human services is an important aspect of policy practice. Field students do an assessment of their placement agencies, examining the funding sources, budgeting plan, and annual report as part of this assessment. In **3425 Practice II**, undergraduates address the basics of budgeting in writing their proposal for their macro project.