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# Using Professional Advisory Committees to Achieve Excellence in Social Work Education

*Tracy J. Dietz, Linda S. Moore, and David Jenkins*

## ABSTRACT

Social work programs are mandated by the Council on Social Work Education to develop and maintain ongoing relationships with social work practitioners and others involved in social services and policy making. A Professional Advisory Committee is one way for programs to receive input from community professionals to strengthen the educational goal of preparing competent, effective professionals. To date, there is little literature in social work on program advisory committees. However, higher education and management literature, along with social work literature on task groups, can provide some direction for developing, maintaining, and effectively using a Professional Advisory Committee in social work program development.

According to the Curriculum Policy Statement of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the overall purpose of social work education is "to prepare competent, effective social work professionals" (CSWE, 1994a, B3.1, p. 96). The task, and often the challenge, of undergraduate social work educators is to provide professional education in an academic environment. To effectively prepare students for practice in diverse, professional settings, CSWE (1994a) mandates that

[S]ocial work programs must establish and maintain close, reciprocal, and ongoing relationships with social work practitioners, and with groups and organizations

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that promote, provide, or seek to influence social policies and social work services ... Effective programs develop and maintain systematic communication with these individuals and groups. (p. 97)

Academicians are at times criticized for their inability to adequately address social needs in their curriculum or for isolating themselves from service providers (Epstein, 1995). Relationships between social work practice and education may not be easy to maintain (Frumppkin & Lloyd, 1995). Yet, social work programs must keep their focus on what needs to be taught so that graduates enter the field prepared to address current social problems with which they are confronted and keep abreast of changes occurring in the practice community (Ryan, 1994; Strom & Gingerich, 1995). The importance of the link between social work practice and education is stressed throughout the literature on social work education (see for example, Frumppkin & Lloyd, 1995; Macy, 1995; Specht, 1995). Relationships between social work programs and practitioners in the community also keep educators in touch with social work practice and fulfill the mandate of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* to continue learning about issues and trends in the practice community (NASW, 1996).

Typically, social work program faculty are involved with community practitioners and agencies in a variety of ways including volunteer experiences, field education, community service, and other activities. Those contacts are possible means for agency-based social work practitioners and administrators to provide feedback to social work programs so that social work education best meets the needs of the practice community. However, some of the existing school-community links that could provide valuable feedback and enhance social work education may be low priorities for program faculty and community social work professionals who experience increasing demands on their time and energy.

A more systematic, formal, and ongoing way for social work programs to maintain relationships with the broader social work community and receive programmatic feedback is through a Professional Advisory Committee (PAC). According to Teitel's (1994) work on advisory committees in higher education, an advisory committee is "a group of volunteers that meets regularly on a long-term basis to provide advice and/or support to an institution or one of its sub-units" (p. 3). Professional Advisory Committees can engage in a range of activities from building good-will between the university and its broader environment to planning and improving aspects of a particular program, such as strategic planning and total quality management (Teitel, 1994).

In social work, PACs can serve the function of maintaining meaningful communication between the program and the practice community regarding the educational needs of social workers. Anecdotal information indicates that PACs are common in social work programs; however, there is little in the literature that discusses PACs within the management and organization of social work programs

(Harper, Ramey, & Zook, 1991). For example, *Directing the Baccalaureate Social Work Program: An Ecological Perspective* (Macy, 1995) has only one paragraph on advisory committees which states that an advisory committee is "invaluable," but does not make suggestions for developing, maintaining, or using an advisory committee in undergraduate social work education.

In a survey of graduate social work programs, less than one-third of the programs surveyed by the National Association of Deans and Directors were classified as having "strong" external relations, yet Specht (1995) concludes that strong external relationships are essential for graduate social work programs. Still, there is no discussion of advisory committees in his chapter devoted to external relations in graduate social work programs. Moreover, the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Edwards, 1995) has no information on PACs. Overall, the development and role of advisory committees in the social work educational process is absent in social work literature.

This article discusses ways to develop, maintain, and effectively use a PAC in social work program development. Strategies are suggested for involving PAC members in all aspects of program functioning and development, establishing mutual support between faculty and community PAC members, and promoting opportunities for PAC members to interact with social work students. It also discusses the experiences of one program in working with its PAC over a 25-year period.

### Development of a Professional Advisory Committee

Although CSWE, through the Curriculum Policy Statement and Evaluative Standards, directs social work programs to develop and maintain links with the practice community, it does not specify how that should occur. Literature on administrative task groups, or working groups and organizational theory, can provide some direction for understanding the development and use of a PAC in social work education. According to the literature on task groups, several factors should be considered including the group's structure and function, composition, and roles and tasks (Ephross & Vassil, 1987; Harris, 1994; Toseland & Rivas, 1984). Organizational theory discusses the importance of considering reciprocal interactions in the process of goal-setting (Thompson & McEwen, 1958).

#### *Structure and Function*

Social work programs must have clear missions that tie them to the universities' missions and focus on the educational preparation for social work practice (Interpretive Guidelines 1.1-1.5, CSWE, 1994b). Once that mission is clearly articulated and goals established, it is the responsibility of the social work program to initiate the development of a PAC (CSWE, 1994a, B3.4). The program

mission should guide the structure and purpose of a PAC and the role of the members should be clarified within the mission of the program. Program faculty must take an active and formative role in the early stages of developing a PAC, establishing an overall purpose for the committee and making initial decisions about its structure and function so it will fit with the program mission. Goals for the PAC should emerge from the reciprocal interaction between the program and the professional community (Thompson & McEwen, 1958).

Though somewhat similar in nature to a board of directors, a PAC does not possess the power and responsibilities typically assumed by a board of directors. Rather, it serves in an advisory capacity as a group of experts with a range of backgrounds and professional experiences. These individuals can offer diverse ideas, opinions, and advice on the strengths and weaknesses of the program and needs that will address changing trends in the practice community. However, like a board of directors, it takes a long-term commitment by the program and the community, and a slow and steady building of a relationship over time (Dillon, 1997).

Further, PACs can help programs achieve excellence in social work education by promoting the social work profession and educating colleagues within the university about professional social work education. Professional advisory committees can also provide linkages between the program and agencies and between social work programs in the same region.

According to the Curriculum Policy Statement, program-community relationships must be reciprocal (CSWE, 1994a, B3.4). That reciprocity is supported by organizational theory that emphasizes reciprocity between organizations and their environments (Thompson & McEwen, 1958). The PAC can be a mechanism for reciprocal interaction. Program faculty and PAC members can suggest ways for the program to address the needs of the community and provide resources to agency practitioners. In a discussion of characteristics of excellence in social work programs, Munson (1994) states that excellent programs should contribute to the community so the community feels it benefits from the program. One-on-one consultations, workshops, continuing education activities, and local involvement with NASW are some of the ways that program faculty can share their expertise and work with practitioners.

The function of the PAC may change over time as the program emphasizes change. The PAC, if strong and clear about its purpose, can modify its function as program needs change. The accreditation process is often the time when the PAC is most active, and for some programs, the only time. However, during other periods, programs may focus on outreach, curriculum development, fund-raising, or other goals. The PAC can be responsive to and supportive of those foci.

In addition to certainty of mission, consistency and regular meetings are factors contributing to greater efficiency (Rohman, 1974). Consequently, in order

to maintain its effectiveness in enhancing social work education, the PAC needs to meet often enough to maintain continuity and its sense of purpose, while not becoming a drain on members' time and energy.

### *Composition*

A PAC typically consists of social work faculty members and community social workers who are asked to serve on the committee by the social work faculty or program directors. Field instructors, practitioners, and administrators from agencies with which the program is affiliated; representatives from the broader social work community; alumni; and students currently enrolled in the program are all logical choices for PAC membership.

To establish balanced membership in a PAC, the important areas from which the program seeks feedback should be identified (Kruzich & Austin, 1995). For example, programs seeking input on the effect of managed care on social work education should include members with a range of knowledge and experience in managed care settings. Because a basic tenet of social work is that there are many ways to achieve a goal, the PAC will be strengthened by including those who can offer diverse opinions. Involving key players from multiple arenas, for example, caseworkers, supervisors, and administrators, increases the likelihood that the committee will perform at an optimal level (Toseland & Rivas, 1984).

Individual programs must balance many factors in determining the actual number of members serving on a PAC. Committees that are too large may result in poor or sporadic member participation; committees that are too small may not have enough members to carry out the work (Gelman, 1995).

University membership considerations include (1) whether some or the entire faculty are PAC members and (2) whether student membership on the PAC is desired. In programs with a large number of faculty members, it may not be feasible to have all of them regularly participate in the PAC. Determining which faculty members should participate, what roles faculty members should take, and how long individual faculty members will serve on the committee should be determined. Student membership on the PAC has the advantage of involving the recipients of social work education efforts, helping students see how the school and community work together to shape the program, and encouraging student input into programmatic decisions. Including representatives from students' social work organizations on the PAC can link students with practitioners. Student members can also share committee activities and discussions with the broader student population.

Community membership considerations include (1) the mix of community-based representatives and (2) the motivation and desire of individual community members to serve and work on the committee. Excellence in social work pro-

grams requires diversity of thought and ongoing, respectful discussions of various points of view (Munson, 1994). There are many variables to consider related to diversity of membership including ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, the range of practice settings, micro and macro foci, administrators, program alumni, BSW and MSW representatives, NASW board members, urban and rural practitioners, and others related to the program's mission. Thus, a discussion of community membership should focus on which variables are most important to meet the program mission and provide high-quality resources for student learning.

For the PAC to be effective, members must have the time and energy to devote to the PAC. It is no surprise that social workers in the community are overworked in their jobs and in their extracurricular activities. However, social workers are expected to volunteer their time to community service activities (NASW, 1996). Practitioners and others who possess a professional commitment to social work education are likely to be interested and motivated to be actively engaged in the committee. In addition, specified length of terms of service and rotating membership on the committee can periodically re-energize the PAC and keep differing viewpoints in balance.

#### *Roles and tasks*

A PAC may assume several roles, including assisting in development and assessment of the curriculum (Interpretive Guideline 6.5, CSWE, 1994b), consulting with the program and individual faculty members, educating program faculty and students about specific topics, and developing a positive community image of the social work program. All of those roles enhance social work education and can help programs achieve status in the university environment and respect in the practice community.

Specific tasks or objectives of a PAC will vary depending on individual program mission statements and specific needs at a given time. Whereas the overall goal is to maintain program-community relationships and provide a forum for feedback, PACs can be encouraged to identify short, intermediate, and long-term tasks or goals (see Ephross & Vassil, 1987; Krulich & Austin, 1995). For example, a PAC may work short-term on consulting with program faculty on student gatekeeping issues as they arise. Intermediate goals may include developing and maintaining a speakers' bureau for classes and identifying new field sites. Working with the program faculty on curriculum development and the accreditation and reaffirmation process are ongoing, long-term tasks with which the PAC can assist. Professional advisory committees can educate university administrators and advocate for social work program needs and resources that will facilitate accreditation and reaffirmation.

### **Maintaining a Professional Advisory Committee**

The effectiveness of advisory committees has rarely been studied. Moreover, deciding on exactly what is meant by an effective PAC proves to be difficult. One author (Teitel, 1994) asserts that PACs are more effective when (1) the committee's input is genuinely desired; (2) members are committed to serving and rewarded for volunteering; (3) the structure and purpose of the committee are clear and the committee is well-integrated with the program; and (4) the expectations for support and advice are clearly articulated to members.

Once a PAC is established, the program faculty can encourage the committee to clarify its purpose and goals, establish bylaws, and set standards. Professional advisory committee members should be educated about social work education, including CSWE accreditation guidelines, and university structure and processes when they begin their terms and when changes in the curriculum or program occur. A PAC handbook or manual is a valuable tool for that purpose.

Consistency should be a goal for the PAC. Regular meetings should be scheduled and the committee should maintain an ongoing presence and voice in the program. Programs should avoid creating PACs that focus only on accreditation or reaffirmation. In those cases, once a program is accredited, the PAC may become a "phantom committee" and no longer have a direction or purpose until the next reaffirmation.

The most effective use of a PAC will occur when the PAC is closely tied to the social work program faculty and students as well as the broader university. Committee members can be involved in all aspects of the program, including serving as field instructors, guest speakers and presenters, consultants to the faculty, and advisors and role models for students. They should be knowledgeable about and involved with other aspects of the university as well.

Kaye (1992) notes that successful advisory groups should, among other factors, have purpose and be productive, and members should know that their contributions are valued. Faculty members can facilitate the community PAC members' role in the program as experts with meaningful advice for the program and students. Because the PAC has an advisory role, the program faculty should ensure that community members see that their input is used so that they maintain their commitment to their role. Members who feel their advice is not taken, or is not valued by the program, are unlikely to continue devoting their time and energy to the PAC.

The main goal of a PAC is to provide feedback to programs so that educational efforts prepare students to become competent practitioners. Other benefits of an effective PAC include strengthening communication between the university and community, increasing opportunities for student connections with the practice

community, and increasing program visibility and positive public relations for the university.

The program faculty should take responsibility for rewarding community members and preventing PAC activities from draining them. Committee members who "get something out of" being affiliated with universities and providing input into social work education will be more likely to remain energized and helpful to the program. Community members may appreciate adjunct-status identification cards, which can entitle them to use of the library and other university resources available to adjunct faculty. Participating in program events, such as student orientations and university recognition banquets, are also ways that recognize and acknowledge the PAC and its members.

### **Case Example: The Texas Christian University Professional Advisory Committee**

The Texas Christian University (TCU) Department of Social Work is a small BSW program in a major metropolitan area (Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas). Texas Christian University is a private, church-affiliated university with a total enrollment of ~7,500 students. Currently, the program has 4 full-time faculty members, 3 part-time adjunct faculty members, and ~100 social work majors.

The TCU Social Work Program has had strong and positive relationships with area agencies and practitioners. A PAC was established at the onset of the program in 1975. Its original purpose was to establish a mechanism for the program to receive community feedback on the overall program and on how best to prepare students for practice.

In the early years, the PAC was composed of program faculty, field instructors, and administrators from agencies that served as field sites. As graduates of the program gained experience working in the community, alumni were added to the PAC. A balance of gender, ethnicity, BSW and MSW trained practitioners, and members from a range of agency settings was sought. The PAC has consistently had BSW representation because the program believes that feedback from those doing BSW practice is essential.

Historically, the committee was primarily faculty-driven. The program director contacted potential members and asked them to serve on the PAC, scheduled PAC meetings, set the agenda, and conducted the meetings. Over the years, transition of PAC members usually occurred naturally. Members left due to changes in positions, moves from the area, burn-out in the social work field, and even death. Periodically, the program director asked members if they want to remain on the PAC. Those who wanted to resign did so at those times. Some PAC members served on the committee consistently from its inception, and a few PAC

members have longer histories with the program than some faculty members, a factor that maintains continuity between the PAC and social work program.

Generally, the program faculty raised the issues that were discussed in the meetings and took major responsibility for the functioning of the PAC. In 1996, the faculty suggested a more independent committee in which community members would assume more responsibility for the direction and function of the group. Overall, the members' responses to that shift in focus were positive and the group moved quickly to implement such a system. Community PAC members developed a more defined structure with terms of service delineated, election of officers, and by-laws reflecting the structure and function of the group. Committee members decided to meet more frequently, to expand representation of membership in terms of diversity and social work settings, and to learn more about GSWE, social work education, and the university. Committee members were involved in the reaffirmation process and used it as an opportunity to learn more about the program and social work education in general.

Over the 25 years of its existence, the PAC has assumed a number of tasks that have directly benefited and strengthened the program. The PAC is a supportive force for the generalist focus of the curriculum. Members were involved in writing the original field evaluation tool and periodically revising it; locating new field instructors and field sites; assisting with accreditation and reaffirmation; providing ongoing feedback on the curriculum, student preparation for the profession, and changing needs for education in the practice community; discussing gatekeeping issues; identifying and advocating for program needs; and providing support for the direction of the program. The PAC was instrumental in helping the program gain its initial accreditation and successful reaffirmation in 1982, 1991, and 1999. Because many members have a long history with the program, they provide valuable information and insights for each self-study document and were knowledgeable and verbal during site team visits. In the most recent reaffirmation, the PAC was cited by the Commission on Accreditation as a "strength of the program."

Presently, the overall goal of the PAC is to act as a liaison between the social work program and the practice community to enhance instruction and provide feedback regarding practice needs. Committee goals include helping to plan and maintain a social work curriculum that addresses the mission of TCU, serves the needs of the Fort Worth community, and meets or exceeds GSWE accreditation standards; assisting in locating excellent sites for field placements; recruiting students to the social work program; alerting program faculty and students to job opportunities in the community; and integrating the social work program into the practice community. For the past three years, the PAC has participated in conducting outcome assessments with graduating seniors. Recently, the PAC is focus-

ing on increasing visibility of the TCU social work program and fund raising activities.

#### *Professional Advisory Committee Member Views on the PAC*

Program faculty have actively solicited verbal and written input from the PAC. Most of the reports from PAC members are positive and complimentary; overall, members value and support the program. Committee members have remained excited and energized about their roles in social work education and shaping the next generation of social workers. Without a doubt, serving on the PAC adds an additional workload to community practitioners, but we found that when given the opportunity, members want to become even more involved.

In general, PAC members report that they like serving as a resource to the social work program. Members find the experience of serving on the PAC to be meaningful and they report satisfaction in being connected with the university, in having their input valued and integrated into program decisions, and in maintaining ongoing relationships with social work education.

On only a few occasions have members expressed frustration with the PAC related to the format of the meetings or a lack of specific tasks for the group. That feedback led to the shift to a more independent, community-member-driven committee, and the development of a PAC handbook that includes general program and university information. The ability to take responsibility for the group and to have more power has reduced frustrations.

#### *Strengths of the PAC*

The PAC has strengthened the TCU social work program in many ways that are evident from the above discussion. The fact that the PAC has been continuously integrated with the program for 25 years shows the commitment of the practice community to the social work program and the value that the program places on community involvement. The PAC has consistently provided feedback on the curriculum; been available for consultation and presentations to students; served as practitioner role models for students; identified job opportunities and hired program graduates; served as a link for university faculty with the professional social work community and local NASW; and presented a strong, positive image of the TCU Department of Social Work and its graduates.

#### *Problems or Limitations*

Although social work educators and practitioners share common concerns, they also bring differing, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives to a PAC. Hartman

(1994) points out the long history of divisiveness between educators and practitioners (p. 162) that is reflected in the fact that social work has an accrediting body (CSWE) that is separate from the major professional organization (NASW). Conflicts between different approaches to social work practice, different fields of practice, and different points of view may play themselves out in a setting that brings together those various perspectives. Social workers are generally aware of an advisory body. By keeping the focus on the value of diversity and need for multiple perspectives in social work education, conflict may be avoided.

In our 25 year history, the energy of the PAC has fluctuated. At times, faculty members and community members have been over-extended in other areas, and the PAC has become a lower priority. Shifting to a member-driven PAC that has specific, identified tasks is one strategy that keeps the PAC more active. Clarity of focus is also important with emphasis on short, intermediate, and long-range goals. In addition, strong leadership is a necessary component for effective PAC functioning. Program faculty must remain actively involved and ready to provide support if leadership falters. In our experience, a member-driven PAC has a stronger commitment to the committee.

Turnover is an issue for any organization and PACs are no exception. Consistency in length and terms of service helps members understand the nature of the commitment they make and eliminates the issue of having to remove a member who has served too long or burned out. Members who have served a long time can provide continuity; new members bring fresh ideas and perspectives. Cooperative social interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 1991) is the goal of the PAC so that people work together to meet positive goals for the program. Lewin (1948) emphasizes that the nature of a group changes when the membership changes. Thus, transition is an important issue to consider. New members must be able to move into the group and be socialized in such a way that transition is smooth and they connect with and promote the goals of the PAC.

At times, the PAC has generated ideas that have increased the faculty workload. That is an area in which we caution program faculty who are developing a PAC. Task responsibility must be carefully allocated and clearly defined to avoid conflict. It is important that both faculty and community members are clear about the advisory role and purpose of the PAC, and work together on identified tasks.

Student membership on a PAC is an issue that can raise questions. The TCU PAC has typically had a student member. An obvious disadvantage of student membership is that faculty and community members may be resistant to openly discuss some issues, such as gatekeeping, in detail with student members present. We believe, however, that the advantage of student membership outweighs any disadvantage and is consistent with the trend towards a consumer presence and representation on boards in public and private agencies (Celman, 1995).