

**Ph.D. Program Curriculum Contributions to the
School of Social Work's Social Justice Mission**

September 28, 2009

Submitted to the School Assembly by
Kia J. Bentley, Ph.D. Program Director

The Ph.D. program is a research-focused program with a mission to create scholars and leaders for social work and human services. One of our three stated program themes is the critical analysis and integration of knowledge and values, especially their relevance to diverse populations and issues of social justice. Every syllabus explicitly describes how a particular course embraces that idea, and the comprehensive exam process specifically evaluates students' ability to articulate it. The dissertation requires students to address the interface of their own research and social work's quest to "make a difference" in advancing social justice. Indeed the explicit and implicit curriculum are all geared to help students acquire the knowledge, values, and skills to consume and produce knowledge, including philosophies, theories and different types of empirical data, and to promote economic and social justice. This includes an appreciation of culture and the diversity of human experience and thought, the exposure and impact of privilege and power on all aspects of knowledge development past and present, and the generation of rigorous research and scholarship which aims to improve the equitable access of people to needed resources and opportunities, especially those who are particularly vulnerable or oppressed. Here is a more specific overview of how our curriculum attempts to achieve these ends:

In our keystone course on the **philosophy of science**, every assignment, whether it is a formal presentation, short paper, or longer manuscript, has an aspect that requires critical thinking and analysis aimed at helping students understand how their choices relative to knowledge building either enhance or impede the social justice goals of the profession. Students, through class work and assignments, are expected to make judgments about the costs and benefits of a variety of philosophical perspectives on what is knowable and how one comes to know it. The goal is to have sufficient information and understanding of important philosophy of science themes and perspectives in the natural and social sciences, including social work, to make informed decisions about research designs that attend to the special needs of diverse populations and to issues of social justice, while also producing useful results from rigorous processes.

In our four required **research methods and data analysis courses**, students are expected to make judgments about the costs and benefits of various qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods, and likewise, understand the implications of all choices for ethics, cultural humility, issues of social justice, and the special needs of diverse populations. They explicitly discuss both intended and unintended consequences of research on vulnerable populations. In a foundation course, for example, the challenges of recruitment of persons of color, LBGTQ persons, and persons with lower socioeconomic status, among others, is discussed. Students are provided a lab opportunity to not only design a realistic and responsive sampling plan, but to interface with a community agency serving the populations-in-need and discuss "real world" challenges and concerns that might be expressed or experienced by potential participants in research.

At the core of both of our **research elective offerings** is the value of creating a more socially just approach to knowledge building aimed at giving voice to multiple perspectives. In constructivist research, the rigor dimension of authenticity, which is required in the research project and audited for quality, assesses the degree to which the inquiry process has been enacted in a socially just way, and further- if, as a result of the inquiry, there is potential for change leading to greater justice. In the program evaluation course, students are presented with the concept of social and economic justice as central to the way in which program evaluation can serve to support the mission, challenge the status quo and/or highlight ways in which social and economic justice can be enhanced. Attention to these ideas is discussed in participatory and empowerment evaluation models in the course. As of this writing, a manuscript is under review- with two doctoral students as co-authors- that explicitly discusses the role of community-based participatory research as one method that can contribute to distributive social justice by insuring that resources of the research enterprise are not only equally divided, but dispersed in a way that addresses historical inequities through the negotiation of tangible and intangible resources among partners.

Likewise, in our two **theory courses**, a major evaluative dimension applied to theories and perspectives is their explicit and implicit congruence with social work values, their relevance to diverse client systems, and the extent to which social justice is advanced. In addition, in the first behavioral theory course, critical and post-modern theories developed to explain or inform issues related to race, gender and class, for example, are presented and analyzed. In the second theory course, students are encouraged to propose models of practice that are integrative and cutting-edge, advance access to knowledge and resources that improve the quality of people's lives, and help them transcend the personal, economic and socio-cultural barriers they face.

Our **capstone course** is explicitly about the analysis of social welfare and the social work profession relating to structure, functions and history from the perspective of social work's values, ethics, professional standards and concerns for social justice. It is designed to foster a critical perspective on the profession in its environment and provide grounding in historical and cultural traditions as well as major streams of social thought influencing the profession, its development and the American system of social welfare. Students identify and explore gaps, dilemmas, conflicts and controversies regarding policy, programs and interventions, and the profession of social work as these relate to the guiding principle of achievement of social justice and diversity.

The **comprehensive exam and dissertation** are two final places where students demonstrate an integration, synthesis and even extension of curriculum content around social justice and diversity. Many years ago the Doctoral Program Committee added a specific grading criterion to each comprehensive exam question that requires students to demonstrate sensitivity to social work principles including the goal of promoting social justice. In addition, as part of the dissertation approval process, students must clearly articulate what and how their dissertation proposes or implies changes that may make a difference in addressing important social problems and promote equity and social justice.