

A BACHELOR OF SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMME IN CANADA: ASSESSMENT OF NEED AND FEASIBILITY

L.T. Becker

Community Social Service Worker Programme, New Westminster, British Columbia

Abstract

Social Service Worker students, both past and present, were surveyed to determine their interest in enrolling in a Bachelor of Social Work Programme at Douglas College in British Columbia, Canada. Without a predictable catchment of students from the community it would be difficult for faculty and management at the college to justify funding the programme, designing new curriculum, hiring additional instructors, etc. Students were surveyed using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative measures over a period of approximately two months. Summary of the data met with positive results yet ongoing research challenges include developing curriculum for approval by college management and the Canadian Association of Social Workers, securing funding from the Ministry of Advanced Education, and hiring additional faculty. As part of its strategic plan the management at Douglas are committed to developing a college with the highest level of Bachelor level programmes offered in the province of British Columbia. As a research problem then it remains to be seen if the interest expressed by those surveyed will translate into the BSW actually being created and delivered.

Keywords: Social work programme, Canada

Introduction

The Douglas College Community Social Service Worker Program (CSSW) is submitting this proposal to deliver a Bachelor of Social Work Degree (BSW) at Douglas College.

One of the key objectives of the BSW is to meet the market demand for BSW level workers which continues to expand in relation to the growth in social service agencies across the province. This fits within the context of strategic planning at Douglas to meet “the demand for degree credentials which is growing substantially.”

As more people find themselves dealing with issues such as poverty, mental health, addictions, and family breakdown, agencies have responded by generating new programs or shifting the focus of how those programs were run traditionally (www.fraserhealth.bc.ca). At the risk of seeming too obvious, as the issues of clients become more complicated, the training of those attempting to help them must also be more advanced. Social workers are required now to be much more than case managers, and while providing resources for people contains evident value, they need to understand in depth the subtleties of each situation systemically and adjust their interventions accordingly. Professionals trained at the BSW credential would have a greater likelihood to appreciate these complexities and to respond both at a micro (individual/family) and macro (community/policy) level to the multiple barriers that clients are experiencing. This may be especially relevant now given the high level of economic uncertainty related to a global recession, increasing personal debt, and a lack of reliable and sustainable employment for many to meet even basic needs (www.fraserhealth.ca/vacancies). According to the BC College of Social Workers, the need

for bachelor level practitioners will continue to grow as the challenges clients experience and their possible solutions require a broad repertoire of skills from the social workers involved. Between 1998-2010 1,890 new social work positions were required to be filled in the province representing a growth rate of 1.7% with 58% of these becoming available due to retirements of the baby boomer generation (www.mcfed.gov.ca). Moreover, changing demographics (an aging population) will result in a rapidly expanding need for professionals to work with seniors.

Second, establishment of a BSW would contribute to the expansion of credentials offered at Douglas College as a comprehensive college. Delivery of a BSW would build upon and enhance the reputation of the College as a vital centre of human services education in metro Vancouver. The addition of the BSW is consistent with the Education Division's three key strategic academic directions/goals for Faculty-based academic programming for 2011-13:

1. Support CSSW graduates to achieve their academic, professional and employment goals.
2. Enhance and strengthen the local and regional profile of Douglas in the B.C. post-secondary system and in human services communities.
3. Provide high-quality social work curriculum, program and faculty development.

The BSW will: further the reputation of CFCS to “offer high quality programs by creating new programs, credentials and career pathways,”; continue to “expand collaborations with community and academic partners,”; and “increase faculty and student engagement in Scholarly Activity.” (CFCS, Tactical Plan, 2010-2013)

Implementation of the BSW meets many of the criteria outlined in the 2013 Strategic Plan:

1. Douglas College will be the largest and most progressive baccalaureate degree-granting college in British Columbia.
2. The College will respond to learner and labour market demand through: developing new programs/courses/pathways such as bachelor's degrees, post-degree credentials, diplomas, certificates.
3. Develop new upgrading curriculum for professionals in the workforce.
4. Enhance linkages with professional associations and accreditation bodies
5. Douglas College will develop superior learner pathways and support students to make transitions both within the institution and external to the college.

Faculties from which students would typically transfer into the BSW include: Child, Family and Community Studies (CSSW, CYC, CCS); Humanities and Social Sciences; and Language Literature and Performing Arts at Douglas, other institutions in BC and elsewhere in Canada.

External partners directly involved with the BSW will include;

- the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE-ACFTS) which is responsible for accrediting degree granting institutions based on curriculum design, governance, resources, etc...

The Ministry of Advanced Education will be responsible ultimately for funding the BSW and

The BC College of Social Workers will be involved in granting status for those graduates who wish to be registered.

- BCAT (admissions and transfer) will be responsible for determining the transfer credit of courses between the BSW and other institutions. In addition to these regulatory bodies an Advisory Committee of social work professionals in the field will be struck to provide suggestions for how the degree meets the requirements of agencies hiring our graduates.

This is a standalone BSW, operating within the governance and academic systems at Douglas College. It is not intended as a collaborative degree with another institution. That being said the CSSW department will have opportunities for interdisciplinary work with other faculties at Douglas in areas of interest which may include community development, administration, women's studies, mental health, culture, healthcare and other opportunities which will develop as the BSW degree is discussed across the College (www.douglas.bc.ca/bachelors-degrees).

Geographically, students interested in pursuing a BSW would benefit from courses being offered at Douglas College with its central location in the Lower Mainland rather than having to travel to other institutions in BC. Increasingly time and transportation costs are an issue for students entering applied academic programmes, many of whom have young families and are working (www.statscan/student). This differs markedly from the educational trends of the recent past, when students entered college immediately after high school, lived at home, and bore less of a financial burden to fund their education. According to the Ministry of Advanced Education (www.gov.bc.ca) these costs are predicted to become even more challenging with a rise in the number of single parent students who will be seeking to upgrade their education at the post-secondary level. Additionally, the Community Social Service Worker Programme at Douglas College, currently a diploma level credential, would attract a larger contingent of students knowing that they could continue their education within the institution where they received their initial training. Professionals employed in the human services field currently would be attracted to the BSW at Douglas to advance in their careers, for job security, to expand their knowledge and expertise, or some combination of the above (www.gov.bc.ca). With a larger student base to draw upon, filling seats in the BSW becomes less of a logistical and funding concern (www.douglas.bc.ca/bachelors-degrees). Development of the BSW within the college will proceed through the typical structures for submitting full program proposals. The letter of intent has been approved by Senior Management and this submission is the next stage in the process.

Institution and system coordination

There are currently nine BSW Programmes being offered in British Columbia from Vancouver Island to the Northern Interior of the province. The impact of the BSW degree at Douglas appears to be twofold.

Benefits include offering a social work degree to those students who would normally travel from the catchment area of Surrey, New Westminister, Coquitlam, and Burnaby to the University of the Fraser Valley or the University of British Columbia. These individuals would be much more likely to complete their BSW at Douglas based on proximity closer to home and the ensuing lower costs of travel and the reputation of the CSSW program with its strong practice base. Students, who had taken courses at Douglas previously, including those in the CSSW programme, would be inclined to remain here for the BSW given a sense of familiarity with the institution, faculty, quality of instruction, practice reputation, and student services. Similarly, CSSW diploma graduates who are now entering the CYCC degree stream might see the BSW as more aligned with their initial studies. Students taking distance education BSW courses through another institution such as UVic might be more attracted to the traditional or hybrid form of delivery provided at Douglas. Despite its growing appeal there remains a problem of attrition for online courses but, for many, the classroom environment provides a culture of support and belonging that can help students be successful.

These benefits for Douglas might also pose a concern for other institutions. UFV and UBC for example would have less students applying to their programs from our region. Online registration at UVic and other schools could drop for those students who prefer the

classroom environment and now have the option, likely closer to where they live, of Douglas. The CYCC degree program would likely receive fewer applicants from the CSSW diploma than they have currently.

Once accredited, graduates of the BSW will have an opportunity to pursue graduate training for an MSW and/or complete courses of interest through continuing education programs. These are offered at institutions locally, across Canada, and internationally.

Effectiveness and efficiency

BSW programs in many ways begin at third year. The first two years consist of several social work specific courses and many arts and science electives. Although this list of electives is prescriptive, it does present a pathway for arts and science students into a social work degree. With some planning, the selected electives could be consistent with the proposed Foundation year. This would strengthen connections between the Faculties of HSS, LLPA and CFCS and would retain students at Douglas.

With the advent of the Applied Psychology degree and the proposed Criminology degree, the BSW will be able to share in a range of courses which will appeal to the varied interests of students in each of the degree programs.

The Child Protection Specialization is currently delivered over two years to CYC students. The Ministry of Children and Families this year has 100 positions open for Child Protection workers. We anticipate that some students in the BSW will take the Child Protection specialization. We think its likely that the combined demand for specialization will permit us to offer the full citation on a yearly basis rather than every second year. We will also need to increase the frequency of offering Disabling Conditions – a course required in the Child Protection Specialization and in Disability and Applied Behaviour Analysis. This course will also be of interest to some student in the Applied Psychology and Criminology degrees.

We do not anticipate other sources of revenue than base funding and student fees.

Institutional human resources

The CSSW programme has a very experienced, innovative faculty who have, in recent years, developed the Uganda project and the Co-occurring disorders programme. One faculty member is the author of a widely adopted text on counselling. Faculty specializations include: counselling, addictions, mental health, family work, gerontology, and international human services.

All faculty have completed their Masters degrees and additional training in areas of interest. All are respected practitioners in the field and are qualified to teach at the BSW level.

Student and labour market demand

The social services sector has undergone significant changes since 1996. Since that time the major funder for social service agencies (the provincial government) has required these agencies to become accredited through one of two accrediting bodies, COA or CARF (www.mcf.gov.ca). The result has been that over 150 agencies are now accredited in B.C. Although these agencies represent less than 10% of all provincial agencies, they hold close to 80% of all MCFD contract dollars. Accreditation requires agencies to hire at an undergraduate level for the majority of line positions whereas historically they were able to hire at a diploma or certificate I level or hire for either credentials or competency. Following this latter practice now costs the agency points in its accreditation (www.mcf.gov.ca). Most agencies now require a BSW degree to assume a full-time, “regularized” position and as a result, employers now require that most managers have a Masters degree in order to ensure

appropriate supervision of staff with degrees. Agencies would hope to hire and retain employees with a background in social work education rather than hire BA level candidates who lack the appropriate training in the field and/or the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings to guide their work

The second major change affecting agencies is the government practice of listing specifically what education a worker must have if the agency is planning to use government dollars to hire. The standard expectation is a BSW degree and this is especially true in the Lower Mainland where the competition for positions is greater than what it would be in more remote areas of the province. Douglas is ideally positioned in the region to meet the demand for educating workers locally but could also provide the necessary credential (BSW) for those who wish to work elsewhere in B.C (CFCS Tactical Plan, 2013).

Twenty years ago, workers needed only a one year certificate in order to satisfy agency hiring standards. Ten years ago, that standard shifted to the 2-year diploma. It is of little surprise to those of us who work and teach in the field to see this evolution. This trend will continue because diploma graduates with the goal of working in large, multi-service accredited agencies and those graduates interested in moving into supervisory and management positions will continue to need to look at ongoing education to achieve their goals. Entry level positions in Social Service Work (diploma) offer a salary in the range of fifteen to twenty dollars an hour, with higher salaries in a larger agency or government settings (www.mcfcd.gov.ca). While this is a manageable starting salary for a young adult beginning their career, a diploma level graduate realizes quickly that the opportunity to obtain a BSW opens the door to higher salaries, career advancement, and job security. Support for the BSW degree is illustrated by the following comments from a recent employee survey (Hanover Group, 2011):

“I currently hold a Diploma in the CSSW program from Douglas which I acquired in 2000. I am also currently enrolled in the Advanced Co-occurring Disorder Citation Program at Douglas College. I do not have a vehicle to drive out to Fraser Valley Institute, and I would rather take the BSW program at Douglas rather than the CYCC Degree program to get into the Ministry of Child and Family Development. There is a DEFINITE need for this program, and when it becomes available at Douglas College I will definitely be one of the first to enroll. Thank you for this opportunity.”

“I like the idea of not having to travel all the way out to Abbotsford, Vancouver, or Victoria to complete my degree. I wouldn’t do my degree at UBC due to time and cost considerations and the fact that the university is unfamiliar to me. I have obtained my diploma through Douglas and absolutely loved the school and the teachers. I would love to continue with Douglas.”

In terms of the quantitative data 15.8% of employees reported that they would **definitely** enrol in a BSW with 38.6% **perhaps** enrolling. Career advancement (77.8%) constituted the main reason for choosing to complete the degree followed closely by improving knowledge and skills (63.5%). Part-time studies were supported by 76.1% of respondents with a further 11.9% preferring to study full-time (Hanover Group, 2011).

BC Work Futures projects that almost 2000 new social workers will be needed in the next five years (730 new positions and 1250 openings due to retirements). According to the Canadian Occupational Projection System (COPS), employment for social workers in B.C. should grow at an annual rate of 1.7% which is somewhat faster than the average for all occupations. An approximate total of 1,540 openings are projected between 2005 and 2013. Of these openings, more than half (57%) are expected to be the result of workers retiring.

In a survey of current students 41.9% reported that they were very likely to enrol in a BSW Programme while 27.4% were somewhat likely to enrol. With the prospect of the BSW being offered at the New Westminster campus, these percentages increased with 45.2% likely

to enrol and 32.3% being somewhat likely to enrol. In terms of course load 47.2% preferred part-time studies while 35.8% preferred full-time studies. When asked why they would enrol in a BSW Programme 79.2% reported to improve knowledge/skills, 88.7% for career advancement and 66% for job security.

The following is some of the qualitative data from the student survey (Hanover Group, 2011):

“I know of many students within my program that are interested in a BSW—Douglas College is an affordable and easily accessible option for many of us. Also, after completing a two-year diploma program at Douglas, it feels like ‘home’ – the instructors are excellent, and location is ideal. I would definitely complete my degree at Douglas if the option was open for me.”

Both the quantitative and qualitative data are supportive of the BSW being a popular option for current students and recent graduates. The percentages are high in favour of the degree being offered with only a small percentage (11.3%) reporting that they would not be interested in enrolling (Hanover Group, 2011). These respondents indicated that family commitments, financial concerns, and satisfaction in their current work precluded them from being interested in a BSW at this time.

“To date I have searched for knowledge and didn’t put a lot of emphasis on a degree but I’m rethinking that.”

“If credits were accepted for previous learning and perhaps relative experience I would most likely go for it. I have a number of credits now but I am also 60 and couldn’t waste a whole lot of years going to school.”

“I am unsure how many of my credits are transferable, and at my age (56) it would not be cost effective.”

It is encouraging for faculty to discover that a majority of students view the prospect of a BSW in a positive manner.

In recent discussions with BSW granting institutions in the province approximately 15-25% of BSW graduates go on for further studies to complete an MSW. These percentages are predicted to increase over time in response to the demands for higher level credentialing across the social service sector. An accredited BSW degree at Douglas will be viewed on par with other BSW’s in the province despite it being new, with less historical precedence as a transfer programme into graduate training. Matching the curriculum at Douglas with other BSW degrees would be one way to maximize portability as much as possible. Meeting the accreditation standards of CASWE-ACFTS would be crucial along with the attendance of faculty and management at province wide forums to promote the programme.

Collaboration

We will review this proposal with the Faculties of HSS and LLPA.

CYC will be consulted specifically about the child protection stream. CCS will be consulted re the Disabilities course.

Programme review

One method to determine if programme objectives have been achieved will be a comprehensive review of those students in the first cohort of the BSW. This can be analyzed in a survey format comparable to what happens currently with the BC Student Outcomes Survey as administered through the institutional research office at Douglas College. For example, data in the 2012 report noted that CSSW diploma students were very satisfied (47%) or satisfied (42%) with their education for a total of (89%) in this category. Fully (76%) of graduates believed the training was very related to their employment . When asked about the usefulness of knowledge and skills gained in performing their job (76%) believed it

was very useful. (86%) of respondents believed that their studies were useful in getting a job, which is a testament to the applicability of the learning and the value of the diploma in the professional community. In terms of finding employment (46%) took less than one month to find a social service position while (38%) found work in 1-2 months. In a similar manner the BSW students could be asked about the relevancy of the curriculum to their professional aims, and whether the programme met their expectations in terms of training and future employment. Attrition rates would need to be monitored and whether the degree helped grads secure advanced employment in the social services.

We find that 100% of respondents were employed in the social service field and we would hope to have these results emulated in the BSW Programme. It would be our intention to continue this same level of commitment to the education of students within the BSW degree.

The Faculty of Child, Family and Community Studies has developed both course and instructor evaluation forms to assess curriculum design and delivery methods. Faculty consistently use these forms after a course is completed to ensure that they are updated regularly and can make informed decisions about assignments, workload for students, and teaching techniques. In addition, student representatives from each year of study are invited to participate in CSSW team meetings. Faculty values the input from students and has made a number of changes to the program based on this feedback. A similar process would be followed to ensure that the BSW is responsive to the learning needs of students, is delivered in a manner that meets accreditation standards, and uses assignments that are both challenging and achievable.

Employer satisfaction will be assessed through feedback at the BSW Advisory Committee and at practicum meetings in which instructors are engaged with students and supervisors in the field. The design of the current curriculum will incorporate this input in terms of making it specific to social workers entering front line positions. Feedback from the employer group has been very positive about the level of practical training within the diploma and we expect this to continue within the BSW. Our aim is for students to have the combination of skills, knowledge and self-awareness to be prepared for employment and to deal with ethical and personal challenges as they arise.

Douglas College faculty, under the terms of the Douglas College Faculty Association Collective Agreement, are evaluated in a formative and summative manner in the first two years of their appointment (www.douglascollege.dcfa). These evaluations are then reviewed by the Associate Dean and/or Dean who compiles the results and meets with individual faculty to review areas of strength and future growth. Following probationary evaluation, faculty are evaluated every three years using the Douglas College post probationary faculty evaluation protocol. The common practice within the CSSW Programme currently moves beyond these basic requirements as students are asked by faculty in each class they teach for evaluative feedback. This same process would be followed to ensure that the BSW degree is responsive to the learning needs of students.

References:

- British Columbia College of Social Workers (2013). www.bccsw.org/
- British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (2013). www.bccat.bc.ca.
- British Columbia Work Futures (2013). www.workfutures.bc.ca
- Canadian Association for Social Work Education (2013). Policies for Admission and Transfer.
- Chappell, R. (2009). Social Welfare in Canadian Society. Toronto: International Thomson Publishing, pp. 87-102.

- Douglas College (2006). Faculty of Child, Family and Community Studies. Child and Youth Care Counsellor Programme. Full Programme Proposal.
- Douglas College (2010). www.douglas.bc.ca/bachelors-degrees
- Fraser Health (2013). www.fraserhealth.ca/vacancies
- Hanover Group (2011). Needs Assessment of a BSW Programme at Douglas College. Hanover Research and Associates, Washington, D.C.
- Hick, S. (2009). *Social Work in Canada: An Introduction*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, pp. 63-82.
- McPherson, B.D. & Wister, A. (2008). *Aging as a Social Process: Canadian Perspectives*. Don Mills Ontario: Oxford University Press, pp. 293-326.
- Ministry of Advanced Education (2013). www.gov.bc.ca/aved/
- Ministry of Children and Family Development (2013). www.mcfcd.gov.ca
- Ministry of Immigration (2013). *Citizenship and Immigration Canada*. www.cic.gc.ca/english/index.asp AND www.welcomebc.ca
- Oakland University (2006). *Bachelor of Social Work Proposal*. www.oakland.edu/?id
- Turner, F.M. & Turner, J.C. (2009). *Canadian Social Welfare*. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada, pp. 183-207.
- University of the Fraser Valley (2013) Faculty of Social Work. www.ufv.socialwork.
- University of Illinois (2013). www.socialwork.illinois.edu/