SW 400: SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND SOCIAL WORK TODAY

Winter 2014, Section 001

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Several selected social problems are presented in this course to illuminate how professional social workers address social issues confronting American society. Each topical area will present how contemporary social work practice addresses the particular social problem within the values of the social work profession. The various methods of professional social work such as interpersonal practice, community organizing, human service management, social policy and evaluation and the various levels of social intervention that focus on individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations will be presented in regard to the particular social problem focus. The selected problem focus allows students to learn about social work's struggles and accomplishments in developing strategies to prevent and cope with these problems, and thus illuminates what the profession is doing -- or could be doing -- in each of these specific problem areas. The course also demonstrates the contribution of social science knowledge and research in conceptualizing social problems, and the importance of multicultural sensitivity in the interventions conducted by social work practitioners.

COURSE CONTENT

The particular social problems selected for discussion will change from year to year depending on faculty interest and the contemporary context. Selected topics may include poverty, homelessness, family violence, divorce, mental illness, juvenile delinquency, inequality, racism, child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, community development, and managed care. The opening sessions of the course will briefly overview the social context for the kinds of roles, interventions, and fields of service that the profession generally operates from, before exploring in depth the professions response to each selected social problem. Important professional themes such as multicultural sensitivity, empowerment, prevention, and value based intervention will also be reviewed in this course. Note: this course is distinguished from a more traditional course on social problems since it focuses specifically on a limited number of selected social problems and probes social work's professional involvement in preventing and assuaging each problem.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:
1. Articulate the various roles, levels of intervention, and fields of service from which social workers practice.

2. Describe the various value dilemmas, political controversies, and societal challenges that the profession of social work faces when it approaches selected social problems.

3. Explain why diversity, empowerment, and strengths-based perspectives are critical to the way social workers approach social problems.

4. Critique the social work profession's response to selected social problems.

COURSE DESIGN

Class sessions are scheduled for an hour and a half, twice weekly. Varied pedagogical strategies are utilized in this course including, but not limited to: traditional lecture/discussion format, small group activities, guest lectures from experts in the field, films and other audiovisuals.

RELATIONSHIP OF THIS COURSE TO FOUR CURRICULAR THEMES:

1. Multiculturalism & Diversity Issues are addressed throughout the course. In the introductory sessions these concepts will be defined and later in each selected social problem area, the impact of diversity and multicultural sensitivity will be related to how the social work profession assesses and intervenes in the particular social problem.

2. Social Justice and Social Change Issues are an integral part of many of the professional roles that social workers perform in trying to prevent and ameliorate social problems: they included such approaches as individual and group advocacy, social action, community development, and advocacy research. Students are encouraged throughout the course to critically analyze both the ways and the degree to which contemporary social work practice has met this traditional mission.

3. Promotion/Prevention/Treatment and Rehabilitation are the range of strategies that the profession of social work brings to bear on contemporary social problems. Students will be encouraged to look critically at each social problem and whether this range of strategies is being employed by the social work profession.

4. Social Science and Behavioral Research is used throughout the course to conceptualize each of the selected social problem areas as well as the effectiveness of methods to address these social problems.

RELATIONSHIP OF THIS COURSE TO SOCIAL WORK ETHICS AND VALUES

This course introduces the concept that professions act within a value and ethical framework. This framework shapes the kinds of interventions that the social work professions can employ in addressing social problems. Elements of the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics and other ethical frameworks are discussed to help students understand the opportunities and parameters of the profession.

ACCOMMODATIONS

If you need or desire an accommodation for a disability, please let me know at your earliest convenience. Many aspects of this course, the assignments, the in-class activities and the way that the course is taught can be modified to facilitate your participation and progress throughout the semester. The earlier that you make me aware of your needs the more effectively we will be able to use the resources available to us, such as the services for Students with Disabilities, the Adaptive Technology Computing Site, and the like. If you do decide to disclose your disability, I will (to the extent permitted by law) treat that information as
private and confidential. Also, please notify me if religious observances conflict with class attendance or due dates for assignments so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES

Please notify me if religious observances conflict with class attendance or due dates for assignments so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

USE OF LAPTOPS AND OTHER ELECTRONIC DEVICES

While in class, students are NOT allowed to use laptops or other electronic devices (i.e., accessing email or the Internet, particularly for non-class related uses, is prohibited). Notebooks will be passed out on the first day of class and students will be encouraged to write and sketch in them over the course of the semester. Also, all cell phones must be turned off during class time (i.e., speaking on your cell and texting are also prohibited).

COURSE RESOURCES

Readings are located in the Resources section of the course CTools site (or handed out in class). See weekly schedule for reading assignments. I reserve the right to assign no more than one additional reading per week.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and Participation (20 points)

In this course, in-class discussions and participation in exercises are considered an essential part of your learning experience. In addition, some of the material considered essential to achieving the objectives of the course will only be presented in class. I expect you to be in class, on time and ready to participate fully. If unanticipated circumstances arise that prevent you from attending or cause you to arrive late or leave early, you must notify me as soon as possible. Missing more than two class periods requires a meeting with the instructor.

Journals, Office Visit and Discussion Facilitation (25 points)

Ten journals (1-2 pages typed, double-spaced and proofread) are to be uploaded to CTools Assignments prior to 10:30 Thursday morning unless otherwise noted. These journals are meant to be an opportunity for dialogue between individual students and the instructor – I will do my best to respond by to each individual journal before the next one is due. Please feel free to use these journals to further explore the Discussion Questions listed on the syllabus, as space for reflection on the readings (or to suggest additional readings) and/or class activities, or to inquire about or generate drafts of course assignments. Each student must also complete one office visit prior to the last day of class. This visit could be used as a consultation, to select an article/topic which the student will use as the basis for leading one class discussion, and/or discuss the Class Presentation (see Assignment III).

Assignment I (Due 6 Feb) (15 points)

(Assignment I contains two parts. The entire paper should not exceed 5 pages typed, double-spaced and proofread.)

(1) Define social work.
Offer a concise definition of social work. Be sure to note your reference(s) – one reference will suffice but you may use more than one that speaks to you. Identify and define at least three social work roles that you might consider engaging in were you practicing in social work currently.

(2) Who are you?

Tell me some things about you that would help me better see why you are in this class. Feel free to address your philosophy of helping; describe how your values and ethical stance support your attitude and beliefs about your notions of social work. Perhaps even identify and clarify what you believe to be your top personal qualifications most suitable for a career in social work. Have any of these things changed since the beginning of the term, and if so, how?

Assignment II (Due 20 Mar) (20 points)

(Assignment II contains two parts. The written aspect should not exceed 5 pages typed, double-spaced and proofread.)

1. Interview a social work practitioner.

Arrange an appointment with a practicing, MSW social worker (not an academic or faculty member). Choose a field of practice of social work or a particular social problem that interests you, and locate a practitioner who works in such a setting or with a particular client group. You may select a social work practitioner who performs any number of social work roles – e.g. clinician, organizer, administrator, researcher, etc.

2. Format the interview as a paper.

In class we will discuss the format of the paper. During the interview, ask the practitioner to show you around her/his agency and describe the various services offered. Also ask your practitioner how her/his interest in the field developed. Put all of the information that you have gleaned from this interview into this paper, concluding with a reflection on how this experience might relate to your potential career in social work or other helping profession.

Assignment III (To occur 15 & 17 Apr) (20 points)

Class Presentation.

During the last three days of class, you will present the culmination of your learning from the semester to the class. You will have 10 minutes to present to the class and this can take any format that you wish, however, it must be an individual presentation, addressing the two points that follow below. Feel free to use audio or visual aids and let me know if you need any assistance. There will be a brief question and answer period following the presentation.

(1) Focusing one social problem, identify at least three recent articles in social work professional journals that help shed light on the core challenges related to the social problem. In what ways did reading these articles shed light on your understanding of your identified social problem (e.g., history or background in terms of severity, who it impacts the most, why it’s a problem, potential causes and risk factors, potential protective factors, and strategies/methods that have been used to address this problem e.g., major interventions)? Articles should be dated 2009 or more recent and you must include references using APA format.

(2) Self-reflection of the social problem. Reflect on your specific interests in this social problem and how you see yourself as a change agent in this area. Consider your social identities and how they might impact your work in this area, both in terms of strengths and in terms of challenges. What
is your vision for social justice in this area? How can you promote social justice in this area in your own life? How might you learn more about this area in the future?

Optional Assignment: (Due no later than 23 Apr) (5 points each)

ONE 3-5 page paper is required based on your participation in the activity from the below list. The written aspect should be typed, double-spaced and proofread.

1. **Getting Help**

   In this exercise you are to assume a close friend or family member is in need of basic needs for survival: shelter, clean clothes, food, transportation, money, and so on. They know you are taking a class in social work and must surely know where they can go to get help. For this assignment, identify one community resource that you might refer them, to get the help they need. Specify the organization (address, contact information, hours of operation, eligibility criteria (i.e., what they need to bring with them in terms of information), and what they should expect upon arrival. In other words, you should arrange to go and get first-hand information! When you arrive, carefully observe the location of the facility, demeanor of the Security Guard (if there is one) and receptionist when you enter the building. Look around the waiting area and observe the kinds of furniture, decor, magazines, condition of the interior, carpet, and so on. Is it clear where to go initially to ask for information? Are there long lines poorly marked? Are folks milling around or just sitting in chairs waiting to be served? How did you figure out where to start? Did anyone offer to help you? Did you receive an application for services and if so, how might you feel about answering these questions? How much time did you spend with the agency before you received the necessary information? Overall, how did the process for finding out the needed information make you feel?

2. **Survival on a Welfare Diet**

   Michigan’s food subsidy for a single adult on welfare for one day is about $3/day. In this assignment you must go to a local store and develop a one-week meal plan using items that DO NOT total more than $21 dollars (including tax on nonperishable goods which in Michigan is 6%). You must consider foods you think will most nutritiously (and best) stretch to meet your needs for the week. Make a list of every item you might purchase and a description (e.g., nutritious value, brand, how many, cost, etc.). At the same time, consider everything else you would need for personal hygiene and household care for one week (e.g., toothpaste, shampoo, soap, feminine hygiene products, paper products, cooking / eating utensils, etc.). Create an additional list of these other items and determine the real cost to purchase these additional items. I encourage you to lay out every meal and specify what you will consume. Comment on the quality of this weekly diet and any struggles that you anticipate trying to stay within the budget. Consider challenges you might face in maintaining a sufficient diet you’re your resources. What kind of food did you “settle on” to make ends meet? In what ways do you think living on a food budget this tight – over the long haul – would impact your physical and mental health? What “lessons learned” from this experience help illuminate the experience of living in poverty?

3. **Public Hearings**

   Attend a public hearing on a community initiative, proposed bill or activity thought to impacts the quality of life for an oppressed client group. This public hearing could be at a local or area school board, city council, county commission, or committee of the state legislature in Lansing. Observe the various groups that either support or oppose the proposal. Describe the rationale of various sides testifying, the reactions of the political figures in the public body, and infer the ideologies that are embedded in the various positions of proponents and opponents of the proposal.
There are many human service organizations that provide volunteer opportunities to members of the community. See for example: http://comnet.org/. Volunteers are trained and used in domestic violence shelters, homeless shelters, crisis hot lines, etc. Some of you may already be involved in volunteer activities, and this assignment will give you a chance to write about these experiences. For students not currently volunteering, this will be an opportunity to locate a volunteer program, complete the training, and participate as a volunteer. (This kind of activity is a prerequisite to most MSW programs). In this paper, you should describe your organization, its clientele, and any reflections your experiences as a volunteer as it relates to a possible career in the field of social work or other helping profession.

For this assignment you are asked to summarize an experience you had either as an observer or member of cultural event that had implications for social work practice in diverse communities. From that summary, identify at least 5 “take aways” or lessons learned that added to your understanding of and appreciation for diversity.

In this course, grading will consider attendance and participation (a combined maximum of 20 points in all), the 2 papers and final presentation (15 or 20 points each or 55 total), plus 10 journals, an office visit and one discussion facilitation (25 points total). Written assignments will be credit or no credit. Credit will be assigned to written work that is complete. For incomplete assignments I do offer an opportunity to receive credit if revisions are made within a one-week turnaround. The only exception will be on optional assignments turned in at the end of the course in which case partial credit may be assigned if all requirements are not met.

A major part of your grade for written assignments is based on your ability to be clear and thorough. All written assignments should be carefully proofread for typos and clarity of content. A paper with lots of errors and/or is difficult to read will be marked down. Unless specified, all assignments should be double-spaced, using 12-point font, no less than 1-inch margins. Use citations as appropriate and use APA format.

You should turn in all written assignments on time. Having assignments in on time will assist me in reading and grading them in a timely manner. On time is defined as turned in at the start of class on the due date. In general, an assignment will be marked down for each day it is late. Exceptions will only be made for extreme circumstances. If you expect that you are going to be late turning in an assignment, let me know as soon as possible so I can plan accordingly. Please try to anticipate your responsibilities and start your assignments well in advance of the due date.

Course grades will be calculated as follows:

- A  100-94/A- 93-90
- B+  89-87/B  86-84/B-  83-80
- C+  79-77/C  76-74/C-  73-70
- D+  69-67/D  66-64/D-  63-60

Schedule of Sessions, Activities, and Readings

9 Jan – Introductions, Learning Objectives and Class Norms

Introduction to Class; Overview of syllabus and expectations; Guidelines for participation.
14 & 16 Jan – What Do Social Workers Do?


Discussion Questions:

What is useful knowledge for social work practice? What do you think are limitations to social work’s knowledge base? What qualifies social work as a “profession”?

Journal 1 due 16 Jan by 10:30!

21 & 23 Jan - Social Work Ethics, Values and Spirituality


Discussion Questions:

Do you have to be a good person to be a good social worker? What do you think are primary ethical problems of social work? Is social work intrinsically helpful?

Journal 2 due 23 Jan by 10:30!

28 & 30 Jan – PODS: Privilege, Oppression, Diversity and Social Justice


Discussion Questions:

What is “culture” and how does understanding culture improve social work practice in diverse communities? What is the difference between cultural competence and cultural humility? What makes you culturally “unique”?

Journal 3 due on 30 Jan by 10:30!

4 & 6 Feb – Women, Sexism and Social Work Education


Discussion Questions:

What makes the social work profession uniquely positioned to focus on issues confronting women in society? What is “anti-oppressive practice” and how does it help us understand women in institutions (and positions) of social control (e.g., women in prison or women in abusive relationships)? In Flood’s list of things men can do to stop sexism and violence against women he suggests: “Talk with women. Find out what it feels like to live with the threat of rape every day. Find out how they like to be supported. Ask what they would like you to do to challenge rape. Really listen.” How might you respond if you were approached by a male peer and asked questions as Flood suggests?

Assignment I due on 6 Feb by 10:30!

11 & 13 Feb – Child Welfare and Disproportionality


Discussion Questions:

What is “institutional racism” and how might it help explain the disproportionate number of children of color in the child welfare system? What other factors might contribute to issues of disproportionality and disparity? What role(s) do social workers play in addressing disproportionality and disparity?

Journal 4 due on 13 Feb by 10:30!

18 & 20 Feb – Elderly, Aging and End of Life Care


Also see University of Albany – School of Social Welfare, Social Work Careers in Aging at

http://www.albany.edu/faculty/mcclion/hiap/social.html

What three “facts” did you learn that you think everyone ought to know about aging and the elderly in the US? What roles do social workers play in working with the elderly? Name at least three social work careers you think are critical to caring for the elderly.
25 & 26 Feb – College Students, Addiction and Recovery


Also browse the web site for U-M’s Collegiate Recovery Program:

http://www.uhs.umich.edu/recovery

Discussion Questions

What are some of the unique challenges confronting college students addicted to alcohol and other drugs? How might Social Workers support collegiate recovery on the Ann Arbor campus and nationally?

Journal 6 due 27 Feb at 10:30!

11 Mar – Family Roles, Codependent and Otherwise (13 Mar: release time so students can attend an open meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous; further details will be given in class.)


Also see related articles in Alcohol Health & Research World, Vol. 21, No. 3 at


Discussion Questions
Does addiction to alcohol and other drugs run in families, and if so how do you see genetics and the environment interacting? What is codependency; is it related to an intergenerational transmission of addiction; and how might Social Workers intervene?

18 & 20 Mar – How Does Substance Abuse Affect Adolescence?


Assignment II due on 20 Mar at 10:30!

25 & 27 Mar – Social Work in Schools


Search school social work as a career, new roles for school social work, federal legislation and school social work on the School Social Work Association of America website

http://www.sswaa.org/

Discussion Questions:

What roles do social workers assume in schools? In what ways is the image of social work in schools considered to be “in crisis”? What do you think are essential qualifications of a school social worker?

Journal 7 due on 27 Mar at 10:30!
1 Apr – Social Work and Sports


Journal 8 due on 3 Apr at 10:30!

How have you been involved with sports? What benefits do you imagine if social workers more involved with youth, coaches, colleges and communities through sport?

3, 8 & 10 Apr – Community Practice


- Gitlin, T. Social Media, the Occupy Movement and Civic Values (pp. 19-22).
- Duster, T. Engaged Learning as a Bridge to Civic Engagement (pp. 41-46).

Preston, A. (2013). Healing America from the inside out: Writer and activist Parker J. Palmer believes to restore democracy, we must first take compassion to heart. Real Change Vol. 20, No. 27.


What is community organizing? What do you think are important qualifications of a social worker engaged in community practice?

Journal 9 due 10 Apr at 10:30!

15 & 17 Apr - Class Presentations

22 Apr – Closure
Journal 10 due on 24 Apr by 10:30 (possible reflection on your presentation and/or others, and/or the class as a whole).