



Bridging the Divide: Competencies to Skills

By Samantha Dutton, Ph.D., MSW

Baccalaureate social work education provides a generalist practice foundation for those students seeking to work in the social work profession. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has a peer led, multi-year accreditation process that ensures students meet educational guidelines. CSWE establishes competencies that align with core values and generalist practice within social work. These competencies drive the educational process for institutions that offer bachelor level social work programs.

The University of Phoenix worked with labor market researchers to align in-demand skills for social work. A quick review of job postings for social workers includes language such as planning, coordinating, interpersonal communication, teamwork, and professionalism. As educators, we understand teaching competencies in the curriculum, to be demonstrated in the field. Are students able to distinguish between competencies and skills? Are they able to translate those skills to a resume that will stand out to potential employers? As social work educators, it is our responsibility to help our students understand and differentiate between competencies and skills.

According to Roslansky (2021), LinkedIn saw a 21% increase in job postings that advertised skills instead of qualifications; however, the competencies established by CSWE can be difficult to translate into employer needed skills. For example, one of CSWE's competencies is "Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior" (CSWE, 2022). To translate this competency into skills language, the faculty and curriculum design planners of the University of Phoenix College of Social and Behavioral Sciences' Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW) program utilized this definition: "Apply ethical and professional behavior in a social work setting." This definition is further detailed to course level skills. Within those course level skills, one is "professionalism." "Introduction to Social Work" is the first course within the BSSW program at the University of Phoenix. The deliverable for the skill "professionalism" was selected to be a video or written report to an ethics board explaining the social worker's responsibility for professional behavior in an assigned scenario. The assignment is graded against a rubric seeking social work values and principles of ethics; ethical dilemmas in social work; professional responses to ethical conflict; cultural competence and

ethics. The measurement of these areas is funneled back to Professionalism, the skill that is listed on job postings.

The BSSW program has mapped skills throughout the entire social work curriculum to the competencies and linked them to the skills that employers are looking for in candidates. The BSSW program has nine program learning outcomes that correspond to the nine competencies outlined by CSWE. From those program learning outcomes, each course has 3 skill outcomes that directly match to the program outcomes and translated to skills needed by employers. Each assignment is built to a skill with a direct link to deliverable found in the career field. To help students identify those correlations, they have a dashboard to view the skills they are learning. Our approach empowers students to articulate those skills to potential employers.

BSSW students must complete 400 hours of field education. Finding a field site can be a daunting task for students. The University of Phoenix has a dedicated field placement team that supports the student throughout the process of obtaining a field site.

Helping newly graduated baccalaureate social workers match what they have learned to what an employer desires is the future. Our program is delivering on that future now.

References

Roslansky, R. (2021, June 8). You Need a Skills-Based Approach to Hiring and Developing Talent. HBR. <https://hbr.org/2021/06/you-need-a-skills-based-approach-to-hiring-and-developing-talent>

Council on Social Work Education website. 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. <https://www.cswe.org/accreditation/standards/2022-epas/>

About the Author

Samantha Dutton, Ph.D., MSW, Lt Col, USAF (Ret), is an Associate Dean and the Director of the Social Work Program in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences with the University of Phoenix, presiding over the Bachelor of Science Social Work program. The program was accredited by the Council of Social Work Education in March 2022.

Previously, she held positions of Deputy Commander of Medical Operations at Mike O'Callaghan Military Medical Center, Nevada, as well as the Medical Squadron at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, and she also commanded the Mental Health Clinic at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. Her military experience spans 27 years with increasing levels of leadership. She has been the recipient of numerous Air Force level awards and was deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom where she was the sole mental health practitioner for 2,500 personnel.

Dr. Dutton earned her doctorate in Social Work and Social Research at Portland State University, and her MSW and BSW at New Mexico Highlands University.