THE GERONTOLOGICAL COMPETENCIES FOR ACCREDITED BACCALAUREATE SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMS

The United States Census Bureau reported an aging population of 55.8 million, which is approximately 17% of the population according to the 2020 Census (Caplan, 2023). By 2030, that number is expected to increase to 64 million older adults, or 21% of the population (Gilford, 1988). According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 75% of social workers will serve older adults in some capacity during their work (NASW, 2005). Yet, very few social work programs provide sufficient knowledge and skills to effectively work with older adults (Rosen & Zlotnik, 2002). There is a significant need for more social workers trained and willing to work with older adults (Diwan et al., 2007; Scharlach et al., 2000).

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requires all competencies outlined in their accreditation document, Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate and Master's Social Work Programs (CSWE, 2022). Unfortunately, these competencies do not include any proficiencies specifically tailored towards working with older adults. CSWE did publish a supplemental recommended guide that focuses on gerontological competencies for social work practice (CSWE, 2015). A few examples of these competencies are:

- Plan engagement strategies and interventions based on understanding of older adults' diverse life courses, strengths, challenges, and contexts.
- Engage older adults, their caregivers, and other constituencies to become aware of their rights to available resources and how they relate to social, economic, and environmental inequities.
- Adopt, modify, and translate evidence-informed practices that are most appropriate to particular aging-focused practice settings and populations.

CSWE has also coordinated multiple initiatives to increase gerontological content in baccalaureate social work programs, such as Gero-ED, an educational initiative to increase gerontological knowledge and skills in students, faculty, and field supervisors (CSWE, n.d.). Additionally, researchers from social work programs across the U.S. have published best practices for implementing gerontological content into BSW programs.

Best practices for implementing these competencies into education programming include:

- Infusing gerontological content into core courses can increase students' perceived competency and their likelihood of working with older adults in their future careers (Diwan et al., 2007; Dorfman et al., 2007).
- Participating in service-learning placements that address varying older adult populations (healthy vs. sick) can increase students' positive attitudes toward working with older adults by dispelling negative stereotypes about older adults (Dorfman et al., 2007).
- Including assignments and activities that focus on older adults can increase students' participation in field placements with older adults and interest in working with older adults (Hash et al., 2007).
- Courses that address ageism, social aspects of aging, and issues commonly faced by older adults can significantly increase gerontological knowledge, decrease ageist beliefs, and increase interest in working with older adults (Snyder, 2008).

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