Competency-Based Social Work Education:
25 Years of Innovation
& Leadership

A white paper exploring the continuous quality-improvement process of curriculum assessment and implementation and organizational change

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**Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences
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| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY |

The creation of this white paper emerged from our desire to meet a number of goals. First, it is created as way of documenting the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences' (the Mandel School) long history of innovation in curriculum development and delivery. Secondly, it seeks to capture both the process and product of our most recent efforts to radically reimagine our social work curriculum. Thirdly, the paper is crafted as a source document for current and future Mandel School scholars to use to spark writing and dialogue about curriculum development, evaluation, revision, and evolution. Finally, it provides us with an opportunity to take a step back to reflect on what we have learned as we continue our journey as social work educators.

The reader who is interested in the historical context will find the initial chapters to be helpful in articulating how the Mandel School's over one-hundred-year history of innovation has nurtured a fertile environment for fostering continuing leadership and creativity in social work education. The school has benefited from the work of early groundbreakers who launched the first program of study in the country in group work. They in turn were followed by generations of pioneers who envisioned curricula based on what students should know, believe, and be able to do (outcomes) rather than the content faculty wanted to teach, and led efforts to fashion the first set of competencies in social work education. These enthusiastic innovators subsequently set the stage for adapting Alverno's (Student Assessment-as-Learning at Alverno College, 1994) concept of assessment *as* learning as well as assessment *of* learning as both being vital components of transformative social work education. In 2002 the first competency-based social work curriculum was launched. Known as ABLE (Ability-Based Learning Environment), the curriculum focused our efforts at assessing the competency achievement of our students. Further innovations such as the development of integrative seminars, intensive weekend programs for employed professionals, and the development of a fully online social work education program all ultimately positioned the Mandel School to be able to use what it had learned from prior experiences to take important next steps.

Using data from multiple sources, a new generation of faculty curricular innovators took the bold step of radically re-envisioning the curriculum in its entirety beginning at the generalist level. The next sections of this report focus on the process that was used to lead the change effort, the curriculum that was developed, the adjustments that were made, and the lessons learned.

We believe that a fundamental tenet of such efforts is an understanding that *curriculum change is organizational change*, that a series of governing values must undergird the change effort. The values adopted by our school served us well. They were:
- Assessment and outcomes drive the process and inform decisions.
- Curriculum change is organizational change.
- Organizational change is strengths based and builds upon existing assets among faculty members and within the current curriculum.
- Innovation is inclusive and collaborative, not top-down.
- Planning is iterative and based upon assessment and outcomes.

We describe the iterative process whereby the curricular leaders undertook a creative reimagining of possibilities followed by discussions with faculty about priorities and interest, returning many times to revise, reimagine, and reflect. This ultimately resulted in the decision to design a curriculum that could prepare students for competency at the generalist level in the first semester of their program, thus leaving more time and space for students to engage in specialized learning.

Also discussed are specific strategies for assuring integration across the curriculum. Among these are various matrices allowing us to map competencies, theoretical perspectives, and later assignments across all

courses. We also identify the importance of assuring alignment within each course between competencies, learning objectives, content, and assessment and introduce the alignment table which became a constant fixture in all of our courses.

Two barriers that were encountered during the planning stage are highlighted. The first was an internal issue. While we were able to secure faculty buy-in for major changes to the generalist and an advanced second semester curriculum, we reached an impasse regarding proposed changes to our areas of specialization and the specialized curriculum. Remembering that curriculum revision is an iterative process, we made the decision to move forward with the changes on which we could agree, and to focus on the new generalist and advanced coursework, leaving the more difficult discussions to a later date. The second barrier, was the onset of a global pandemic just at the time that we were slated to launch a brand new in-person experience for our incoming students. Our prior experiences with online education and our decision to begin developing course assets that could be used in all formats allowed us to quickly pivot and to offer the new curriculum remotely.

Subsequent sections describe the specifics of the newly developed generalist curriculum. We begin by highlighting the new CHAI (Change Agent Intensive) course that jump starts the semester. CHAI is an immersive experience that introduces students to the mission, purpose. and values of the social work profession, acquainting them with some of the social issues and problems that social work addresses, and challenging them to think about how these issues manifest and must be addressed at all levels of the social environment. The course also begins students on their journey of developing critical thinking and self-reflection skills and heightens their awareness of the importance of advocating for social, economic, and environmental justice throughout their practice.

Other unique features of the revised curriculum include a specific focus applying theory to practice skills at all levels of intervention; a new course that addresses theories of human diversity and human development in an integrated offering; a reimaging of the traditional research course to focus helping social work students to be good consumers, contributors, and evaluators rather than conductors of research; a true integration of micro and macro practice so that all social workers think intentionally about the best level(s) for intervention in each instance, and purposeful efforts to integrate assignments across courses. We conclude by discussing a variety of strategies used for evaluation and a series of lessons learned. Among the most important of these lessons is that while *curriculum change is organizational change*, it is also an iterative process that will never be completely achieved.

We seek to be transparent throughout this monograph, identifying where innovations were successful, where resistance to them emerged, and where they needed to be modified or walked back. By taking the stance of life-long learners who seek to make decisions based on data and experience, we are the first to acknowledge that we have not always gotten it right. However, we have been able to carry forward our commitment to viewing social work education as continually evolving, and to remain curious about the next steps.

Our hope is to spark continuing dialogue with our colleagues nationally and internationally about both the process and the products involved in curricular innovation. While we must ground our efforts in our own individual contexts, we have a great deal to learn by working together.