

A STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS OF ADMISSION
IN A BACCALAUREATE SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM

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by:
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IN A BACCALAUREATE SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM

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DEDICATION

To my family whose collective efforts and sacrifices made my doctoral education possible, I cannot adequately express my deep love and gratitude for your emotional support and much-needed help with meals, housekeeping, childcare, laundry, and even interview transcriptions. To dear friends who provided their support through summer housing, encouragement, and prayer, I give my sincerest thanks.

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ABSTRACT

Social work programs shape the profession through their admission practices. Therefore, admission, as the entry point to social work programs, serves a highly important role in social work education. Though frequently addressed in the literature, admission and gatekeeping procedures continue to be significant problems of practice for social work educators. The author completed a stakeholder analysis of a baccalaureate social work program to seek stakeholder perspectives on admission practices by conducting interviews and focus groups with 53 participants representing seven stakeholder groups. Results suggest that external stakeholders such as field instructors, social service employers, and adjunct faculty members are not widely represented in the BSW admission process. Overwhelmingly, participants favored selective admission policies for social work programs. Four categories of stakeholder expectations for social work admission were found: gatekeeping for professional suitability, a process of self-reflection for students, an indicator of educational quality for the social work program, and progression of students' professional socialization as a social worker. Findings provide insights to inform faculty as they oversee social work admission. By framing admission as a function of students' professional socialization as well as an extension of the educational process, faculty may use admission more purposefully to further students' professional development. In addition, including external stakeholders in the admission process can promote greater diversity of reviewers and practice areas represented.

SECTION ONE:
INTRODUCTION TO DISSERTATION

Background

The social environment of the 1960s brought substantial numbers of candidates to social work programs, along with steady state and federal funding for social services and professional social work education. In the 1980s, however, the political climate changed, with significant cuts to social services, and applications to social work programs decreased (Gibbs, 2000; Peterman & Blake, 1986). Subsequently, social work programs faced pressures related to declining enrollments (Peterman & Blake, 1986). To compensate, programs began to admit candidates with lower admission standards as applied to grade point average (GPA) and entrance exam scores (Born & Carroll, 1988; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Karger, 2012; Kropf, 2000; Stoesz, Karger, & Carrilio, 2010). Admission acceptance rates for graduate programs soared from 41% in 1975 to 70% in 1984 (Born & Carroll, 1988).

In the 1990s, enrollments in social work programs began to increase again, with social work education facing rapid expansion, often overwhelming faculty to manage student numbers with limited institutional resources (Gibbs, 2000). Among the growth trends were more students and dramatically increasing numbers of newly accredited baccalaureate and master's social work programs (Karger, 2012; Stoesz et al., 2010; Zastrow & Bremner, 2004). From 1990 to 2004, the total number of accredited social work programs rose from 99 to 186, an 88% increase (Kindle & Colby, 2008). From 2003 to 2011, the number of programs continued to increase by another 41% (Council on Social Work Education, 2012; Zastrow & Bremner, 2004). For graduate programs, specifically, the number of accredited programs grew from 86 in 1986 to 170 in 2004, a 98% increase (Karger, 2012). Despite increasing numbers of students, enrollments did

not keep pace with the proliferation of programs (Stoesz et al., 2010). As a result, programs loosened admission requirements to maintain necessary enrollments. Admitted students began to have lower GPAs; more applicants were admitted on probation; and programs made exceptions to admission criteria more frequently (Stoesz et al., 2010). In 2005, the admission acceptance rate for graduate programs grew to 75%, a level that suggests nearly open enrollment practices among graduate social work programs nationally (Kindle & Colby, 2008).

During this era, it appears that admission and scholastic rigor declined in social work programs. Hepler and Noble (1990) compared bachelor of social work (BSW) students' academic portfolios with other majors in an applicant pool for a master of social work (MSW) program and found that BSW students had significantly higher GPAs, but significantly lower Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and Test of Standard Written English (TSWE) scores. There have been other indications of grade inflation among BSW students pursuing graduate study, as their MSW academic performance measured through GPA has ranked lower compared to non-BSW majors, adding to concerns that baccalaureate social work GPAs overestimate scholastic abilities (Fortune, 2003; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Watson & Rycraft, 2010). In a review of grade inflation in social work programs, Miller (2014) cited additional examples: In fall 2012, 73% of all grades granted to social work students at the University of Missouri were *As*. In 2006, social work majors at the University of Utah had the highest GPA of any other major, a 3.74 compared to the campus average of 3.17. "For social work students, the result can be the mistaken belief that the profession of social work is 'easy' and that work with client systems requires little preparation and effort" (Miller, 2014, p. 16). Once more, "when

mediocre preparation and effort is rewarded...this behavior will likely generalize to other settings, including practice settings, after graduation. This can place vulnerable client systems at risk and potentially lead to harm to those vulnerable client systems” (Miller, 2014, p. 16). Peterman and Blake (1986) also expressed concerns that programs project the idea that social work is an “easy” or “second class” (p. 31) major by accepting and retaining students with lesser scholastic abilities. With low academic standards, programs risk losing and retaining high-quality students. While grade inflation is, by no means, limited to social work majors, there are serious potential ramifications to future clients if, as Miller (2014) suggested, social work programs are matriculating too many unprepared and overconfident graduates to enter practice. Alarming, there is evidence to suggest that declining selectivity has begun to manifest itself in practice standards, with decreasing passage rates on national licensure exams and increasing ethical violation reports (Karger, 2012; Sowbel, 2011; Stoesz et al., 2010).

Once admitted, few social work students are subsequently terminated from their programs (Born & Carroll, 1988; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Sowbel, 2011). Poorly performing graduates and practicum students harm the reputation of social work programs (Tam & Kwok, 2007). Program integrity requires high evaluative standards at multiple checkpoints of social work education: admission, coursework, field practicum, and graduation (Madden, 2000). Evidence suggests that gatekeeping at the other educational stages is weak, with issues of grade inflation (Hepler & Noble, 1990; Miller, 2014; Sowbel, 2011) and low rates of student attrition or termination (Hepler & Noble, 1990). If other gatekeeping checkpoints are ineffective, then program admission becomes all the more crucial and worthy of additional study.

Gatekeeping has been a topic in social work education since the 1800s (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Moore & Jenkins, 2000); nonetheless, gatekeeping tasks and policies continue to perplex faculties (Curren & Atherton, 2008; Miller, 2014; Sowbel, 2012). Problematic student behaviors, as linked to concerns for future practice, are commonly identified within the areas of (a) emotional, behavioral, mental health, and substance abuse; (b) ethical violations; (c) academic performance or grades; (d) performance in practicum; and (e) criminal activity (Koerin & Miller, 1995; Lafrance, Gray, & Herbert, 2004; Reynolds, 2004; Sowbel, 2012). Overwhelmingly, faculty and program directors indicate that addressing problematic student behaviors is a significant and ongoing policy issue in social work education (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Cole & Lewis, 1993; Curren & Atherton, 2008; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Lafrance et al., 2004; Reynolds, 2004; Sowbel, 2012). Nevertheless, social work faculty grapple with the gatekeeping role. Often, faculty experience conflict in their roles as encouragers, nurturing student growth and development, and guardians of the profession, protecting current and future clients (Curren & Atherton, 2008; Miller, 2014). Faculty's reticence to take action typically focuses on concerns about litigation, role conflict as educators, and unclear criteria for evaluating students (Miller & Koerin, 1998; Sowbel, 2012). Moreover, faculty have differing educational philosophies about gatekeeping. For example, do they conceptualize gatekeeping as a one-time admission issue, an ongoing socialization and educational process, or an ad hoc function for situational responses (Koerin & Miller, 1995)?

The proposed study investigates admission and gatekeeping in social work education. The researcher presents a problem of practice in social work education and

the gap in existing literature. Next, the study's purpose and research questions are presented. The researcher then outlines the study's guiding theoretical framework and its research design, including limitations and definitions of key terminology. In conclusion, there is a discussion of the project's significance in contributing to both educational practice and scholarship.

Statement of the Problem

Social work is a profession whose core values embrace helping marginalized and oppressed populations. Because of their mission to serve vulnerable people, social workers must demonstrate ethical behaviors and competent practice skills. In social work education, there are too many students who are unprepared or unsuitable for "field placements, working with clients, and entry into the profession" (Barlow & Coleman, 2003, p. 151). Professional gatekeeping, a controversial topic within social work education, is defined as "preventing the graduation of students who are not equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and values for professional practice" (Koerin & Miller, 1995, p. 247). Therefore, admission, as the entry point to social work programs, serves a highly important role in social work education. Admission processes are a time and resource-rich endeavor for social work programs (Bridge, 1996; Munro, 1995); finding effective screening mechanisms for program admission is challenging (Tam, 2003). Though addressed regularly in the literature, gatekeeping and admission procedures continue to be significant problems of practice for social work programs.

How do schools of social work effectively and efficiently identify the most qualified students for their programs? Furthermore, how do programs screen candidates who are unsuitable to the profession? The body of social work literature on admission

includes many theoretical and practice pieces, addressing the topic of gatekeeping within a policy framework such as what elements gatekeeping policies should include (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013; Huff & Hodges, 2010; Urwin, Van Soest, & Kretzschmar, 2006), legal aspects of gatekeeping (Cole, 1991; Cole & Lewis, 1993), and negative behaviors that gatekeeping policies should address (Moore, Dietz, & Jenkins, 1998; Morrow, 2000). Empirical studies tend to focus on identifying variables that predict student success in social work programs to help guide decision making during admission (Dunlap, Henley, & Fraser, 1998; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Pelech, Stalker, Regehr, & Jacobs, 1999; Reynolds, 2004; Thomas, McCleary, & Henry, 2004). Significantly, many gatekeeping and admission studies tend to survey and present the perspective of program administrators (Tam, 2003). Additionally, the literature addresses social work educators as having ethical obligations to various constituencies during admission and gatekeeping (Born & Carroll, 1988; Curren & Atherton, 2008; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Lafrance et al., 2004; Regehr, Stalker, Jacobs, & Pelech, 2001; Sowbel, 2012). Nevertheless, this conversation rarely frames the affected groups as stakeholders to the admission process, or compares and contrasts multiple stakeholders' expectations of admission for social work programs, or discusses how faculty acknowledge and address competing interests among the stakeholders as they administer the admission processes.

Purpose of the Study

Social work programs weigh multiple criteria during admission. Because social work is a profession of practice, successful graduates must demonstrate competence in social work knowledge, values, and skills. In addition, social work literature identifies

that students should also embody certain personal and professional characterological traits. The challenge of admission arises in how faculty identify the professional potential of applicants when traditional academic measures offer mixed effectiveness in predicting student success in social work programs. Suitability to practice and professional gatekeeping are interrelated concepts and practices. Admission becomes further complicated when considering the legalities associated with gatekeeping policies and issues of social justice that affect students' academic performance and access to higher education. There are multiple stakeholders who hold varying degrees of interest in who is allowed entrée to the social work profession. This study will identify who the stakeholders are in social work program admission by conducting a stakeholder analysis assessing what the various groups want/expect from social work admission and how their expectations are being met at Faith-Based University, a Christian liberal arts university located in the Midwest and identified by pseudonym. Further, the researcher will evaluate how expectations about social work admission and gatekeeping vary across stakeholder groups and how social work educators balance competing interests among stakeholder groups as they administer admission procedures.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. Who are the stakeholder groups for social work admission?
2. What do stakeholder groups want/expect from social work admission?
3. How do expectations about social work admission vary among stakeholder groups?
4. How do stakeholder groups interpret the gatekeeping function of social work admission?

5. How do faculty members consider competing stakeholder interests when conducting social work admission?
6. What can be learned from stakeholders to inform social work admission practices?

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework by which the study is supported and designed is Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory. In *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, the term *stakeholder* was introduced as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Stakeholder theory was developed in response to rapid business shifts in the 1960s and 1970s, as corporations became increasingly more dependent upon multiple external forces for success. Freeman's work embraced a scholarly practitioner approach, offering a theoretical perspective to management decision making with practical application to leaders in the field, hoping "to enrich the way that we think about our organizations" (p. 1). Stakeholder terminology was first documented in business management literature in 1963 by the Stanford Research Institute; the term was applied to expand the concept that corporations must be responsive to more groups than just stockholders. If organizations failed to engage support with their stakeholder groups, Freeman posited they would not survive.

The stakeholder approach borrows concepts from strategic planning, systems theory, corporate social responsibility, and organizational theories (Freeman, 1984). Organizational planning focuses on resource management in relation to the external environment and acknowledges larger contexts for organizations, including concepts of cooperation, interconnectedness, and interdependence. Strategic planning involves

direction setting, assessing available resources along with environmental threats and opportunities. Using a stakeholder approach, leaders can engage multiple stakeholder groups to address “system-wide problems” (Freeman, 1984, p. 37). Freeman (1984) presented stakeholder theory as integral to organizational strategic management, using the stakeholder concept to understand “how organizations do, and should, set and implement direction” (p. 47).

Organizations cannot “manage in isolation” (Freeman, 1984, p. 26); they engage with their environments. Therefore, organizations must understand and engage strategy for each represented stakeholder group. *Stakeholder management* embodies organizational efforts to “manage the relationships with its specific stakeholder groups in an action-oriented way” (Freeman, 1984, p. 53). Organizations should identify who their stakeholders are and how they manage various stakeholder relationships. Freeman (1984) described a *stakeholder role set*, recognizing that some constituencies will have multiple memberships in stakeholder groups which will result in role and values conflicts. Furthermore, it is important to operationalize what *stakes* are, which represent the interests, influence, and power of various groups. It is *voluntarism* that leads organizations, upon their own volition, to meet the needs of key stakeholders.

For major strategic issues (such as admission and gatekeeping in social work programs), stakeholder theory suggested that leaders assess the potential effects on stakeholder groups. Thus, organizations should develop decision-making and planning processes that are sensitive to stakeholder concerns and develop relationships for interaction with stakeholder groups (Freeman, 1984). An important tool for identifying stakeholder groups is the *stakeholder map*, which is a pictorial depiction of the

organization's stakeholder system. With a strong focus on practitioner utilization, Freeman (1984) presented several tools of stakeholder analysis such as the stakeholder audit process, stakeholders/issues matrix, and stakeholder scorecard.

Stakeholder groups are not all created equally, so analysis will assess key stakeholder attributes (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Specifically, organizations should analyze stakeholders in terms of their power, legitimacy, and urgency. *Power* is about influence and affecting outcomes in one's favor. *Legitimacy* entails perceptions of social acceptance, social desirability, and properness. Finally, *urgency* reflects issues of critical importance or with time sensitivity (Mitchell et al., 1997). Understanding stakeholders in terms of their power, legitimacy, and urgency guides leaders in stakeholder management, to accurately assess and successfully interact with various groups.

Savage, Nix, Whitehead, and Blair (1991) proposed four strategies for managing stakeholders according to group typology. First, involve *supportive stakeholders*, those who sustain organizational goals and efforts, in activities such as participatory management for internal stakeholders and production processes for external stakeholders. Key to supportive stakeholders is sustaining ongoing partnerships, careful to avoid neglect and atrophy. Next, *marginal stakeholders* are those who are "neither highly threatening nor especially cooperative" (Savage et al., 1991, p. 66). Marginal stakeholders require monitoring; organizations should stay abreast of the narrow and highly specific interests of marginal stakeholder groups to engage cooperation versus potential conflict. For *nonsupportive stakeholders*, groups who pose threats and little chance of cooperation, defensive strategies are necessary to reduce dependence on these

groups, through such efforts as marketing or other means of handling competition. In this arena, organizations “should always try to find ways to change the status of key stakeholders” (Savage et al., 1991, p. 67). The fourth typology is the *mixed blessing stakeholder*, who typically plays a significant role with the organization, for these stakeholders have the potential to cooperate with or pose threats to the organization. For mixed blessing stakeholders, Savage et al. suggested collaborative efforts through joint ventures and partnerships.

Stakeholder theory is based in the field of business management but lends itself well to education, educational leadership, and evaluation. Social work education involves a system of parties, including university administrators, faculty, field instructors, students, social service employers, and clients (Tam & Coleman, 2009). Conceptualizing social work programs as educational systems supports application of a stakeholder theoretical framework for understanding perceptions of admission and gatekeeping (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). A stakeholder approach is meaningful, given social work programs’ interdependence with the practice community for the signature pedagogy of field education and social work’s professional value of providing service in the community.

Stakeholder analysis techniques have been suggested for promoting utilization-focused evaluation (Bryson, 2004; Bryson, Patton, & Bowman, 2011), which parallels the goal of scholarly practitioner research that knowledge is applied by users (Archbald, 2008). Freeman (1984), Bryson (2004), and Bryson et al. (2011) inform the proposed study with their presentations of methods for identifying, engaging, and analyzing stakeholders. For example, Bryson et al.’s (2011) stakeholder toolkit will influence and

guide data-collecting methods such as focus groups. In the original presentation of stakeholder theory, Freeman was a strong proponent of using qualitative methods such as interviews, historical records, and artifacts to assess stakeholders' perceptions, values, and concerns. Thus, a qualitative spirit of inquiry also guides this study.

Creswell (2009) conceptualized research design as the “intersection of philosophy, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods” (p. 5). This study is influenced by the philosophical worldview of social constructivism, which holds that people seek meaning and understanding in their life experiences (Creswell, 2009). Research from a social constructivist perspective focuses on human interactions, settings, and context. Thus, researchers with this philosophy seek to discover others' views on life and work, rooted in their personal settings and steeped within social and historical contexts (Creswell, 2009). Significantly, as a fellow participant in the research process, the researcher should acknowledge background and experiences that will inescapably shape interpretations for planning the study and analyzing results (Creswell, 2009). Applied to this study, the researcher seeks to understand stakeholders' perspectives of and experiences with social work admission processes. Guido, Chávez, and Lincoln (2010) expanded the application of constructivist-guided practice to include partnering with “those they serve to co-construct services, programs, and solutions” (p. 15). Merriam (2009) called this applied research to “be used by administrators and policymakers to improve the way things are done” (p. 4). Themes of application and partnership resonate with scholarly practitioner research, as results can be used to improve educational practice in social work program admission. Using study results to improve practice will

contribute to improved services, programs, and solutions for the social work program's stakeholders including students, field instructors, and faculty.

Study Design

Social constructivist philosophy lends to qualitative strategies as researchers use open-ended interviewing to elicit participants' views on the subject under study and then interpret meaning from the field data (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). As such, this study will use a qualitative research strategy. Specifically, the researcher will conduct a case study of admission processes at Faith-Based University, the bounded system, using qualitative methods (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). In this section, research design will be presented (Creswell, 2009).

Setting

The proposed case study is delimited to the social work program at Faith-Based University, studying specifically the process of program admission. Faith-Based University is a small, Christian liberal arts university located in the Midwest and identified by pseudonym. Admission is a context-specific activity that ideally reflects unique aspects of institutional mission, history, curriculum, faculty governance, and community needs (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013; Gibbs & Blakey, 2000; Miller & Koerin, 1998), all of which support a case study approach. When conducting problem-based research in educational practice, the organization's "local context" (Archbald, 2008, p. 726) becomes highly pertinent and relevant to the study process. Therefore, researchers in practice assess and present the background unique to the organization under study (Archbald, 2008). To prepare for a study of social work admission procedures at Faith-Based University, organizational context should be considered.

Accordingly, in Section Two the researcher will examine a brief history of the program, assess the program's organizational and leadership context, and then culminate with a discussion of implications for research in practice at this setting.

Participants

Merriam (2009) described two levels of sampling in case studies. First, the researcher selects the case under study. Next, the researcher determines sampling methods for selecting participants in the study. The project will identify study participants at two levels: (a) stakeholder groups and (b) specific individuals who represent those groups. Stakeholder theory, in the form of stakeholder analysis techniques, will inform the sampling process. As Bryson et al. (2011) noted, "Deciding who should be involved, how, and when in doing a stakeholder analysis is a key strategic choice" (p. 3). Nonprobability sampling is common to qualitative research, of which the purposeful sampling technique of maximum variation sampling will be used. Maximum variation sampling is choosing a wide variety of cases to discover "central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon" (Patton, 2015, p. 283). Further, maximum variation sampling yields "(1) high-quality, detailed descriptions of each case, which are useful for documenting uniqueness and diversity, and (2) important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity" (Patton, 2015, p. 283). With literature support, purposeful sampling predetermines the following stakeholder groups, at a minimum, should be represented in the study: faculty (Curren & Atherton, 2008), students (Campbell, Campbell, & Das, 2013), field instructors (LaFrance et al., 2004), social service employers (Seipel, Walton, & Johnson, 2011), university administration (Urwin et al., 2006), and clients (Manthorpe et al., 2010; Matka,

River, Littlechild, & Powell, 2010). To seek feedback from a client perspective, the researcher will seek participants who are now social work practitioners but were previously service receivers.

The study will also use theoretical sampling, where sampling is conducted simultaneously with data collection (Merriam, 2009). Theoretical sampling is “an ongoing sample selection process” in which “the total sample is not selected ahead of time” (Merriam, 2009, p. 79). For example, the project will include Freeman's (1984) stakeholder map activity to brainstorm groups with interests in the social work admission process at Faith-Based University. The researcher will conduct this activity in a group interview with the administrative team of the social work program. This group interview will be the first effort at data collection, which will result in further identification of stakeholder groups to represent in the study. Using Freeman's mapping activity, the group will help identify essential selection criteria for stakeholder groups whose interests are salient to program admission at Faith-Based University, justifying their importance while exercising member checking and peer review techniques (Merriam, 2009). Further, as the researcher meets with stakeholder groups, collecting and analyzing data, additional groups with interests in social work admission may be identified to include in the study.

The next step in sampling will be identifying participants to represent the various stakeholder groups. Again, the researcher will use a purposeful sampling technique with theoretical sampling used “with an initial sample chosen for its obvious relevance to the research problem” and “the data lead[ing] the investigator to the next document to be read, the next person to be interviewed, and so on” (Merriam, 2009, pp. 79-80). The project will also employ quota sampling, which complements theoretical sampling

(Patton, 2015). Quota sampling ensures the representation of important groups in a study by selecting a “predetermined number of cases...to fill important categories of cases in a larger population...regardless of their size and distribution in the population” (Patton, 2015, p. 268). The researcher will establish criteria for selecting individuals to represent each stakeholder group (Merriam, 2009). Where available, social work literature and stakeholder theory will guide development of selection criteria. For example, the researcher may determine that field instructor representatives must have proctored students for at least three years to ensure they have adequate experiences with social work students upon which to form opinions about gatekeeping. Furthermore, selection criteria for field instructor representatives should also include a variety of social work practice settings so that comments may be more general in nature and not, for example, attributed to admission perspectives of one area of social work specialization.

The researcher must also determine how many participants to include from each stakeholder group. As stakeholder theory suggests, stakeholder groups hold varying levels of power and interests (Freeman, 1984). Thus, quota sampling ensures a forum for disparate voices within the study. Because multiple stakeholder groups will be studied, interviews with highly populated stakeholder groups will include approximately 10 representatives from each group. For stakeholder groups with fewer members, such as university administrators, the researcher will attempt to interview at least three representatives when possible. As a scholarly practitioner, the researcher is engaged with potential participants in daily work as a social work professor. Potential participants will be contacted by telephone and email correspondence.

Data Collection Tools

For this study, data will be collected through interviews and focus groups. The project will include focus groups with stakeholders, as well as interviews with individual representatives of stakeholder groups who are unable to participate in a group interview or for whom confidentiality must be protected. Interviewing is the preferred technique when conducting “intensive case studies of a few selected individuals” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88) and seeking historical perspectives on a topic (Creswell, 2009). Since this is an interview-based study, the researcher is using Rubin and Rubin’s (1995) text to guide development of the interviews.

Using focus group interviews is supported when seeking “insight on organizational concerns and issues” (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 10) for understanding others' perspectives, policymaking, and conducting needs assessments, which parallel the study's purpose. Furthermore, focus groups are appropriate strategies for uncovering a “range of ideas or feelings” to “understand differences in perspectives between groups or categories of people” (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 19). The researcher will schedule focus groups in a multiple-category design, alternating stakeholder constituencies. Krueger and Casey (2009) suggested planning three to four focus groups for each stakeholder category, then assessing for saturation of new information. Interview and focus group plans are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Schedule of Interviews and Focus Groups

Stakeholder Group	Type of Interview or Focus Group
Social work program’s administrative team	Group interview #1
Social work program’s administrative team	Group interview #2
Faculty	Focus groups
Field instructors	Focus groups
Practitioners who are former clients	Individual interviews
Students	Focus groups
University administrators	Individual interviews
Social service employers	Focus groups

For both individual and group interviews, a semistructured format will be utilized. A structured section of questions will seek specific information consistently across all stakeholder groups to allow for comparisons (Merriam, 2009). Consistent with a social constructivist approach, the researcher will be flexible, too, and allow emerging content from the interview to guide dialogue (Merriam, 2009). See the interview/focus group questioning routes in Appendix A. As Krueger and Casey (2009) suggested, a 90- to 120-minute focus group format is anticipated. Along with traditional questioning routes, the researcher will incorporate stakeholder analysis techniques in data collection, including the power versus interest grid and stakeholder influence diagrams (Bryson et al., 2011; Freeman, 1984). For individual interviews, a one-hour format is planned. Since the focus groups and interviews will be conducted with a research institution, institutional review board approval applies. Participants will be informed about the

purpose, conditions, and nature of the study, along with how results will be used (Krueger & Casey, 2009). No special research considerations, such as misleading participants or interviewing minors, are necessary. See the Consent to Participate in Interview/Focus Group in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

“Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research” (Merriam, 2009, p. 165). Krueger and Casey (2009) added, “Doing analysis as you go improves data collection in focus groups” (p. 116). Accordingly, the researcher will prepare short summaries, or memos to self, after each focus group to guide development of future questions and topics as the study progresses (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009). To organize and manage data, the researcher plans the following system: First, audio record interviews and transcribe them using McLellan, MacQueen, and Neidig's (2003) transcription styling. Code and label each interview and maintain a case study database for cataloging and organizing data (Merriam, 2009). Finally, employ the audit trail method for documenting and detailing the qualitative research process (Merriam, 2009).

Next, “making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning” (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). Thus, the researcher will use the constant comparative method of data analysis to identify “categories or themes or findings” (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). Open coding will be utilized, and then the researcher will group the open codes into categories using axial coding (Merriam, 2009). To facilitate comparison of data among stakeholder groups, a color-coding technique of

printing transcripts on different colors of paper assigned by stakeholder group will be used (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Constant comparative analysis will culminate in identifying patterns of data and discovering relationships among ideas and concepts (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Additionally, the project will follow McLellan et al.'s (2003) suggestions for storing and destroying audiotapes, reviewing transcripts for accuracy, saving transcripts, and maintaining confidentiality of records.

Qualitative research is concerned with *trustworthiness*, referring to the rigor and accuracy of the study (Creswell, 2009; Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006; Merriam, 2009). Researchers build trustworthiness by adhering to high standards of qualitative research that promote validity and reliability. In this project, the researcher will triangulate data by comparing multiple sources of data collected in interviews and focus groups held at different times, in different places, with different participants representing multiple constituencies of stakeholders (Merriam, 2009). Member checks, where the researcher shares data and initial interpretations with participants to check their plausibility, will be used (Merriam, 2009); this approach applies principles of utilization-focused evaluation to help engage practitioners in the later application of findings to inform and improve practice (Patton, 2008). Trustworthiness will be attained by adequately engaging in data collection, which entails conducting interviews until findings are saturated and no new themes emerge (Merriam, 2009). In data analysis, the researcher will purposefully seek discrepant or negative cases; credibility is gained by seeking alternative explanations “that might disconfirm or challenge your expectations or emerging finding” (Merriam, 2009, p. 219).

Continuing, there will be disclosure regarding researcher positioning and self-reflection on how personal biases, relationships, and assumptions may have affected the study (Merriam, 2009). Because the study will be presented to a dissertation committee, it will involve a peer review process (Merriam, 2009). In addition, the researcher will seek peer review with a mentor and former department head who is a qualitative researcher. Already, she has graciously offered to review the study. As previously mentioned, the researcher will maintain an audit trail book documenting procedures, methods, and decision points of the study (Merriam, 2009).

Another hallmark of sound qualitative research is the use of rich, thick descriptions, “providing enough description to contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situations match the research context, and, hence, whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam, 2009, p. 229). To this end, the researcher plans to follow Krueger and Casey's (2009) recommendation of presenting findings with at least three examples from the data for each theme. Finally, the researcher will be mindful of maximum variation as purposeful and theoretical sampling techniques are employed to include diversity in “sample selection to allow for greater range of application of the findings by consumers of the research” (Merriam, 2009, p. 229). The researcher can achieve greater maximum variation being mindful of diversity among study participants to include representation of multiple stakeholder groups. For individual participants, maximum variation extends to personal characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, years of experience as a social work practitioner, and practice setting.

Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls

Within qualitative research, rigor and accuracy are reflected as trustworthiness (Merriam, 2009), meaning that “qualitative research should as closely as possible reflect the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the people who participate in our research” (Lietz et al., 2006, p. 444). As Lietz et al. (2006) asserted, “qualitative researchers must engage in a variety of strategies in order to describe research findings in a way that authentically represents the meanings as described by the participants” (p. 444). While the researcher in this study will engage techniques of triangulation, member checks, prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, audit trail, and reflexivity to increase trustworthiness, there remain some limitations within the design. Specifically, there are limitations in respect to reflexivity, triangulation, and transferability.

Reflexivity, or the researcher’s position, is a process of constant reflection on the researcher’s role in the co-construction of meaning during the study (Lietz et al., 2006; Merriam, 2009). “Because human beings are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and interviews” (Merriam, 2009, p. 214). Therefore, research interpretations are filtered through the researcher’s own disposition, biases, worldview, and assumptions (Merriam, 2009). For research in practice, as in this study, researcher bias is complicated by the researcher’s dual roles of researcher and employee within the practice setting. Additionally, the researcher has prior and current working relationships with participants in the stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and individual interviews. Accordingly, the researcher will clarify and disclose her “assumptions, experiences, worldview, and theoretical orientation to the study” to provide insight into her

interpretations, conduct, and conclusions (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). The researcher's position and dual roles are acknowledged and will be explicitly reported (Lietz et al., 2006).

Another limitation of the study is the use of a single investigator. Ideally, multiple researchers engage in qualitative data collection and analysis to compare and cross-check observations and perspectives (Merriam, 2009). While *investigator triangulation* is not possible in this study, the researcher will employ member checks and peer review, along with triangulation through multiple methods of data collection, to increase trustworthiness. Finally, there is the issue of transferability within qualitative research. Generalizability in qualitative research is conceptualized in terms of the study's reader or user and the "extent to which a study's findings apply to other situations" (Merriam, 2009, p. 226). By providing thick, rich description and contextual details, the researcher will allow readers/users to assess and decide how findings apply to their educational settings (Merriam, 2009).

Definition of Key Terms

Admission

Admission is the process by which students formally apply to and join a social work program at either baccalaureate or graduate levels. Social work programs establish admission criteria and the methods by which to measure candidates' applications (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013; Gibbs, 1994b). A selective admission process assesses candidates' academic potential and evaluates personal characteristics, or suitability, for the practice of social work (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam & Kwok, 2007; Younes, 1998).

Field Instructor

Field instructors are experienced, practicing social workers who supervise, or proctor, social work interns during their practicum experiences in agency-based settings. Field instructors are considered “partners in the social work education process” (Miller & Koerin, 2001, p. 1), becoming “an extension of the academic faculty and carry[ing] comparable gatekeeping functions” (Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p. 16).

Gatekeeping

Professional gatekeeping is defined as “preventing the graduation of students who are not equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and values for professional [social work] practice” (Koerin & Miller, 1995, p. 247).

Professional Suitability

Professional suitability is the demonstration of “positive social work practice qualities that reflect appropriate standards of professional conduct” (Coyle, Carter, & Leslie, 2011, p. 542), including compatibility with social work values and principles (Moore & Jenkins, 2000). Social work students and practitioners also demonstrate professional suitability through professional knowledge and skills, personal traits, ethical behavior, and psychological well-being (Moore & Urwin, 1990).

Stakeholder

Freeman (1984) defined a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (p. 46). For this study, the stakeholder concept is applied to an undergraduate social work program and the groups who comprise its system of social work education.

Significance of the Study

Contributions to Scholarship

This case-study stakeholder analysis contributes to the scholarly discussion about gatekeeping and admission to professional social work programs. The research addresses a gap in social work literature by identifying stakeholder groups for social work programs and seeking the various groups' perspectives on gatekeeping and admission policies.

While specific to the case study setting, this information can be relayed and connected to wider discussion within the field of social work education.

Contributions to Practice

The research has clear connections to educational practice, with a strong utilization focus on policymaking for practitioners. Specifically, the study's sixth research question (*What can be learned from stakeholders to inform admission practices?*) is summative and contributes to educational practice by offering findings to inform faculty as they oversee admission to the social work program. Results may be used to guide decision making about eligibility criteria, selectivity, and admission processes for social work programs; findings may also illuminate areas of growth for stakeholder development and connection-building between a social work program and the professional social work community. Understanding perspectives of various stakeholders could help faculty better design and implement admission procedures and gatekeeping to the profession (Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006). Results can impact social work programs as new data are interpreted and applied in data-driven decision making for developing, enacting, and administering admission policy (Kowalski, 2009; Marsh et al., 2006).

Summary

Admission, along with its gatekeeping function, is a significant problem of practice for social work programs. As guardians of the profession, social work educators have ethical responsibilities to conduct effective admission procedures. To learn more about social work admission, the researcher will conduct a case study at Faith-Based University. The researcher will identify the major stakeholders to the social work admission process and elicit their perspectives on professional gatekeeping. Guided by Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, the study will employ a qualitative research strategy within the worldview paradigm of social constructivism. The researcher will collect qualitative data by conducting focus groups and individual interviews with representatives of the various stakeholder constituencies. As a scholarly practitioner investigation, the study will contribute to both social work scholarship and social work educational practice.

SECTION TWO:
PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY

Introduction

When conducting problem-based research in educational practice, the organization's "local context" (Archbald, 2008, p. 726) becomes highly pertinent and relevant to the study process. Therefore, researchers in practice assess and present the background unique to the organization under study (Archbald, 2008). To prepare for a study of admission and gatekeeping in the social work program at Faith-Based University (FBU), organizational and leadership context will be considered. Accordingly, this section examines a brief history of FBU and its social work program, assesses the organizational and leadership context at FBU, and then culminates with a discussion of implications for future research in practice at this setting.

History of the Organizational Setting

Identified by pseudonym, FBU is a comprehensive, private, Christian liberal arts university located in the Midwest. Formed in 1955, the University is committed to integrating learning with Christian faith to prepare students for their vocational callings in all professional fields including ministry. FBU offers 65 undergraduate majors and 19 graduate and doctoral degrees, has enrollment of over 2,100 students, and has been accredited by the Higher Learning Commission since 1965.

FBU is owned and operated by the national council of a large, Christian denomination. In 2010, the council established a task force to begin the process of consolidating three of its schools: FBU, a graduate school of theology, and a college whose focus was baccalaureate-level ministerial training. The council's strategic vision was to strengthen the schools both academically and financially by preventing duplication of academic programs and services and streamlining operating costs. In

spring 2013, the Higher Learning Commission approved the schools' consolidation plans into FBU, and the council hired a new president to lead the consolidated university. FBU's new president assumed leadership in July 2013. In fall 2013, the three schools were successfully consolidated into FBU.

The proposed study will be based in FBU's social work program, so a brief review of that program is offered. In 1982, FBU offered its first social work course, Social Casework. In the following year, FBU added the social work major and began the process for program accreditation by the Council on Social Work Education. The FBU bachelor of social work (BSW) program has been accredited since 1998. The social work program is a member of the Behavioral Sciences Department at FBU, along with psychology and criminal justice programs. Currently, the FBU social work program has three fulltime faculty members and over 60 students. All three faculty members hold administrative appointments, with one as department chair of behavioral sciences, one as social work program coordinator, and one as social work field education coordinator. The social work program typically contracts with four adjunct faculty members annually. On average, the program engages around 12 field instructors per year to supervise students during their BSW practicum.

Organizational Analysis

A scholar-practitioner model is designed to examine, investigate, and analyze educational practice (Schultz, 2010). To be effective in this endeavor, the scholar-practitioner develops a contextual understanding of the practice setting. Bolman and Deal (2008) presented a four-frame model for understanding organizations: (a) structural, (b) human resource, (c) political, and (d) symbolic. Using these four frames of

organizational analysis, the researcher will examine salient organizational issues at FBU and its social work program for research-in-practice purposes.

Structural Frame Analysis

A structural frame analyzes organizations in terms of construction, how they are designed and coordinated to achieve established goals, their hierarchy and roles, and their rules and procedures of operation (Bolman & Deal, 2008). As organizations grow and become more complex, they evolve into predictable structural designs (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Mintzberg, 1979/2011). Like many universities, FBU is a *professional bureaucracy* in which there is a large *operating core*, a very small *technostructure*, and a moderately sized component of *support staff* (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Mintzberg, 1979/2011). Administration, known as the *strategic apex*, spans the technostructure and operating core and extends to the *middle line* of midlevel administrators (Mintzberg, 1979/2011).

The heart of an organization, an operating core comprises members who perform the basic operations of the university including administrative components (Mintzberg, 1979/2011). At FBU, the operating core largely contains faculty and extends to the middle line of academic program coordinators and department chairs. FBU's strategic apex consists of the University's denominational governing board, the President and executive staff, and the President's cabinet whose members include the Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs, President of the Seminary, Vice President for Business and Finance, Vice President for Student Development, Vice President for University Advancement, Vice President for Enrollment Management, and Chief Information Officer. The FBU technostructure, whose work is analysis and training (Mintzberg,

1979/2011), includes human resources and the auditing function of business and financial services. Finally, support staff provides services that assist the organization's operating core (Mintzberg, 1979/2011). At FBU, the operating core is engaged in teaching or research. Support staff components involve services such as campus security, residence halls, student health, building maintenance, and conference services (Mintzberg, 1979/2011).

After FBU's reconsolidation, the academic departments were organized into two schools: (a) arts and sciences and (b) theology and church ministry. Within arts and sciences, there are eight academic departments including the behavioral and social sciences, which houses the social work program at FBU. The school of theology and church ministry combined training programs from all three consolidating schools and now has three academic departments. Each department is led by a faculty chair. FBU's structure is consistent with small liberal arts schools (Baldrige, 1980/1983). However, a more well-rounded approach to organizational analysis is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the University.

Political Frame Analysis

A bureaucratic, structural analysis of university organization is inadequate (Baldrige, 1980/1983). Political forces must also be examined to understand university processes more fully. Through a political frame, organizations are conceptualized as "ongoing contests of individual and group interests" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 194). Within organizations, coalitions form, there is competition for scarce resources, power is an important asset, and organizational action emerges from bargaining and negotiation (Bolman & Deal, 2008). During times of scarce resources, organizational politics often

become more intense (Bolman & Deal, 2008). In educational settings particularly, decreasing resources can result in closing campus facilities, terminating academic programs, and laying off staff (Bolman & Deal, 2008). It is a climate of scarce resources the FBU community currently faces.

As the political frame acknowledges “conflict and power as central to leadership” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 225), there is certainly a moral dimension to management and leadership. Burns (1978) recognized “the potential for influence through leadership is usually immense” (p. 43). The leader’s role is to raise staff’s consciousness to define their values in a meaningful way, then encourage and move employees into moral action (Burns, 1978). Moral leaders seek to take the right actions instead of merely achieving the right outcomes (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Burns, 1978). Counter to conventional interpretations of competitive organizational politics (Burns, 1978), moral leadership embodies principles of openness and caring (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Openness is the willingness to make one’s rationale and decisions public. As Lax and Sebenius (1986) prompted, “Would you be comfortable if your co-workers, colleagues, and friends were aware that you had used a particular tactic?” (p. 149). Moral leaders open themselves to public criticism and do so out of caring and sincere concern for others. At FBU, administrators demonstrate openness by hosting faculty and staff meetings that conclude with question-and-answer forums. Further, the Provost has held informal breakfast meetings for additional question-and-answer sessions to address openly and directly faculty’s concerns regarding the University’s financial well-being, potential layoffs, and closure of academic programs.

Human Resource Frame Analysis

Within a human resource frame, the focus of analysis shifts to people and their needs within organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2008). A human resource lens interprets organizations as existing to meet human needs rather than people existing to meet the organization's needs. Organizations can promote "productive people management" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 141) through the application of basic human resource strategies. In particular, FBU applies human resource principles and strategies in retaining, investing in, and empowering employees.

FBU administration expresses a strong commitment to members of its organization, referring to faculty, staff, and students as a *community*. FBU's administrators appear particularly skilled in open communication by hosting community meetings, faculty meetings, full faculty and staff meetings, and ad hoc meetings to disclose important operating information about the University (Mihelic, Lipicnik, & Tekavcic, 2010). Along with directly and clearly communicating with people, FBU promotes the human resource principle of retaining faculty and staff through the practice of rewards (Bolman & Deal, 2008). For example, FBU grants faculty and staff bonuses upon certain years of service. When faculty members teach course overloads, they are paid additional salary. Further, FBU actively invests in people by supporting their learning and sponsoring career development opportunities (Bolman & Deal, 2008). In this area, FBU is preparing to launch a new professional development program for faculty in the use of online learning systems. Additionally, FBU rewards faculty who achieve additional educational credentials through promotions and salary incentives.

In light of significant structural changes and recent financial challenges at FBU, the organization is especially adept at empowering faculty and staff and giving them voice during times of change. During the FBU consolidation process, for example, administrators convened focus groups with various constituents to gather their input. FBU also provides information and support to employees through the use of community meetings, during which the President provides details about University financial reports, budgeting, and accounting practices. FBU encourages participation of its employees as well, tasking individual departments with redesigning their majors, degree programs, class schedules, and course periodicity to operate more effectively and efficiently.

An organization's human resource philosophy is reflected in its management practices and treatment of its most valuable resource—people. Human resource practices become even more crucial during times of organizational change and environmental challenges (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The human resource philosophy at FBU appears predicated upon common values (Mihelic et al., 2010) and shared trust throughout the organization (Levi, 2014). FBU's administration demonstrates trustworthiness when it openly reports operating information to the University community; faculty and staff demonstrate trust through participation and cooperation in the organizational change process (Levi, 2014). FBU reflects principles of open communication and common values as the organization engages in strategies to retain, invest in, and empower employees.

Symbolic Frame Analysis

As previously detailed, FBU has recently undergone significant organizational restructuring. Universities, as professional bureaucracies, are noted as particularly

resistant to external organizational change (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Within academic organizations, most faculty attain more influence through technical competence, which is based on their expert and information power, than through the legitimate and coercive power granted through official positions (Baldrige, 1980/1983; French & Raven, 1959/2011; Levi, 2014). As experts in their respective disciplines, faculty members are often more strongly tied to their fields than to the university (Bolman & Deal, 2008). At FBU, however, faculty members demonstrate a striking difference in organizational allegiance that can be understood best through a symbolic lens of analysis.

Bolman and Deal (2008) emphasized that “meaning is not given to us; we have to create it” (p. 248). Interpretation, or how people make meaning of their experiences, is of greater importance than the actual events or activities of their work life (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Martin 2002/2011). Thus, a symbolic frame of organizational analysis focuses on meaning, expression, and culture within an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). This symbolic frame analysis will focus specifically on organizational values and the importance of ritual at Faith-Based University.

“Values characterize what an organization stands for” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 255) and provide members “with purpose and resolve” (p. 254). Driven by four guiding ideals, the FBU ethos is (a) integrational, (b) exploratory, (c) pluralistic, and (d) confessional. The FBU worldview is integrational with the belief that faith affects all things, and all things affect faith. Learning is exploratory, with the FBU community seeking and discovering Spirit-led intellectual pursuits. With a pluralistic view, FBU embraces a diverse student body who will serve the global community upon graduation. Finally, FBU’s focus is confessional, meaning it is Christ-centered and manifested in

Spirit-led learning, experiences, and living. The FBU ethos is based much upon the works of Arthur F. Holmes, a noted philosopher and Christian educator. Holmes (1975) maintained that “Christian education should not blindfold the student’s eyes to all the world has to offer, but it should open them to truth wherever it may be found, truth that is ultimately unified in and derived from God” (p. 19) and, further, that “all truth is God’s truth, wherever it be found” (p. 17). The shared values among administration, faculty, staff, and students at FBU are a defining characteristic that carries highly important symbolic meaning to the organization, its culture, and members.

Bolman and Deal (2008) observed that the “soul is the secret of success” (p. 289) and “the essence of high performance is spirit” (p. 290), which help explain the importance of ritual at Faith-Based University. From the perspective of organizational theory, *rituals* are the routine acts of everyday life within the organization that provide “structure and meaning to each day” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 261). At FBU, administrators regularly convene and conclude meetings in prayer. Further, faculty share meaningful exchanges and connections through monthly devotions. At FBU, leaders work to establish shared vision, align people, and motivate and inspire others (Kotter, 1990/2011b). As people face times of uncertainty, as FBU does now, symbolic acts can help employees “find direction and anchor hope and faith” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 253).

This organizational analysis concludes with examination through a symbolic lens, for nurturing organizational culture and symbolic meaning in one’s work appears to be a source of strength at Faith-Based University. Moreover, administrators at FBU appear adept at leading organizational change and growth through the skilled usage and

application of all four organizational frames. Structurally, FBU is organized as a professional bureaucracy similar to most small, private liberal arts colleges (Baldrige, 1980/1983). The University has recently undergone significant organizational restructuring with the consolidation of three schools into one unified, comprehensive Christian liberal arts university. Assessing through a political frame, FBU's President has demonstrated ideals of moral leadership while coordinating organizational change, managing scarce resources, and responding to a changing higher education landscape. During such times of organizational upheaval, the FBU organization has displayed strong commitment to positive human resource management. Woven throughout FBU's management and operations is the application of the symbolic frame, where the organization's values are explicitly publicized, and ritual connects the campus community.

Leadership Analysis

Leadership can profoundly affect an organization. Accordingly, scholar-practitioners assess the research setting's leadership model in addition to organizational context. Therefore, this section will also address leadership at FBU for research-in-practice purposes. As discussed in the organizational analysis, FBU has undergone significant structural reorganization over the past two years. Structural change requires leadership that can effectively lead and manage change (Kotter, 1990/2011b). In *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*, Kotter (1995/2011a) outlined eight leadership steps for transforming an organization. Using Kotter's (1995/2011a) framework, the researcher will assess how FBU's administration applies concepts of change management in its leadership approach.

Fundamental to Kotter's (1995/2011a) framework is the understanding that organizational change is a process. Transformation efforts begin when members of an organization evaluate marketplace and competitive realities and recognize major opportunities or potential crises that others seem to be ignoring. Aligned with Kotter's (1995/2011a) first step on change management, these individuals must convey this information to others and *establish a sense of urgency* within the organization. During this phase, leaders recognize the need for major change, engage in frank discussions about competitive realities, and then motivate the "aggressive cooperation of many individuals" (Kotter, 1995/2011a, p. 3) to enact the change process or the effort will fail. In the case of FBU, its competitive realities involve issues of financial performance and its place in a changing higher education environment. To establish urgency among FBU's faculty and staff, the President has held community meetings in which she has detailed forthrightly the status of the University's financial standing, campus facilities, and enrollment numbers.

However, transformation efforts cannot be sustained by a lone leader (Kotter, 1995/2011a). Instead, the leader must *form a powerful guiding coalition* of key personnel "in terms of titles, information and expertise, reputations, and relationships" who "come together and develop a shared commitment to excellent performance through [organizational] renewal" (Kotter, 1995/2011a, p. 7). At FBU, the President's cabinet actively participates in the organizational change process. The cabinet includes administrators and staff from key positions in finance, admission, enrollment, and academic affairs. Furthermore, the President and cabinet have *created a vision* for FBU to direct its transformation, along with specific strategies for attaining that vision. At

FBU, those strategies are to increase revenue through enrollment growth, expanded fund development, and reduced operating expenses.

Next, the transformational leader will *communicate the vision*. A common pitfall for change efforts is under-communicating the vision: “Without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured” (Kotter, 1995/2011a, p. 10). FBU’s President has demonstrated particular skill in this area, hosting community meetings with faculty and staff in which she presents financial data and vision strategies. During the President’s communications with faculty and staff, she demonstrates data-driven decision making by presenting and interpreting institutional data, then integrating and applying the data into strategic planning and action (Marsh et al., 2006; Petrides, 2003). As Kotter (1995/2011a) noted, this communication stage is more difficult when organizational change will likely include job losses. During change, employees will be unwilling to make personal sacrifices unless leaders project a vision of future growth and treat people fairly in layoffs (Kotter, 1995/2011a).

FBU’s President demonstrates traits of a learning leader, including openness as she hosts public forums and question-and-answer sessions with the University community (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). Furthermore, the President displays traits as a leader of hope, displaying optimism and sustaining “hope in the face of struggle” (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 171). When leaders encourage hope through spiritual leadership, they motivate others to work toward the organization’s vision and increase others’ commitment to making improvements (Helland & Winston, 2005). Faculty and staff at FBU have responded positively to the President’s leadership. For example, faculty accepted increased teaching loads without additional compensation to defray costs

for one academic year. When retirement incentive packages were offered, one faculty member declined the additional payouts because he/she had already planned to retire. Another faculty member declined his/her teaching overage pay. By sharing examples at FBU community meetings, the President inspires hope by highlighting how faculty and staff actively contribute to change and difference at FBU.

After a leader has communicated the new vision for the organization, she will *empower others to act on the vision* (Kotter, 1995/2011a). In this phase, “action is essential, both to empower others and to maintain the credibility of the change effort as a whole” (Kotter, 1995/2011a, p. 13). Using principles of data-driven decision making (Marsh et al., 2006; Petrides, 2003), the Provost’s Office has presented to the academic departments enrollment rates for all academic courses, majors, and programs and established new minimums for continuation. The Provost has challenged departments to find their own ways to consolidate academic programs and course offerings and better manage enrollments rather than issuing top-down edicts for change. Furthermore, the Provost facilitated a vision-casting and strategic-planning exercise at an all-faculty meeting empowering faculty to identify innovative ways to communicate the FBU vision to students and continue integrating learning with faith. The faculty exercise applied principles of sensemaking and visioning (Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski, & Senge, 2007/2011). Sensemaking involved a process of mapping complexities of the current teaching/learning environment at FBU, particularly related to attaining FBU’s mission of integrating faith and learning. Visioning focused on creating future goals for teaching and learning at the University (Ancona et al., 2007/2011). The Provost’s participatory

style of open communication and leadership (Marsh, 2010) demonstrates a collegial, rather than bureaucratic, model of academic governance (Baldrige, 1980/1983).

As change efforts are underway, the leader will *plan for and create short-term wins* for the organization (Kotter, 1995/2011a). More specifically, the leader plans for some visible performance improvements and then creates those improvements. At an FBU community meeting, the President announced that the University must demonstrate cost savings of approximately \$4 million and presented three strategies for achieving this goal. Within two months, the President held a follow-up community meeting at which she announced that FBU had met this first financial goal. While a relief for ongoing financial solvency of the University, this short-term win was not without loss in human capital as meeting the financial goal was achieved, partially, through layoffs of 12 faculty and staff. At the same meeting, the President announced another short-term win: a new \$2 million donation to the University that was not calculated in meeting the \$4 million budget-reduction goal. The donor gifted the \$2 million based, in part, on the University's transformation efforts in response to its current financial circumstances.

Ultimately, organizational transformation requires time. To continue long-term change efforts, leaders actively work to maintain the sense of urgency (Kotter, 1995/2011a). In the next two phases, transformational leaders *consolidate improvements and produce still more change* and then *institutionalize new approaches* (Kotter, 1995/2011a). These phases can hold potential traps for leaders and their organizations. FBU has met its first, crucial financial goal. Temporary relief, resistance, or inertia could develop among faculty and staff and dampen their motivation and willingness to continue making necessary adjustments in operations. As Kotter (1995/2011a) noted, changes to

organizational culture may take up to 5 to 10 years to consolidate. Successful organizational change in academic settings continues with ongoing goal-setting, work, progress monitoring, and evaluation (Marsh, 2010). Therefore, administration must continue efforts to actively lead change and transformation at FBU. The administration's leadership philosophy indicates a long-term and, more importantly, highly skilled commitment to the organizational change process.

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

Organizational context is pivotal to research-in-practice endeavors when the scholar-practitioner needs access to data and proceeds to implement recommendations. At FBU, administration appears highly supportive of instructors pursuing doctoral studies. Several faculty members who hold high-profile appointments at the University have earned doctorates in education, which suggests opportunity for researchers in practice. At FBU, issues of organizational change and resource management seem particularly relevant to an employee conducting problem-based research within the practice setting.

Notable FBU alumni, local social work practitioners, faculty, and some administrators have expressed interest in expanding the University's social work program to include a master of social work (MSW) degree. Here, the proposed study's focus on social work admission processes using stakeholder feedback could be used to help inform the University's decision making for developing an MSW program. In light of changes in resource management at FBU, the proposed study may indicate an increased financial investment in a strongly performing academic program. Alternatively, decreased

resources may indicate no expansion efforts or a delay in expansion until such time the University is operating in a stronger financial position.

In addition, the researcher seeks understanding in how stakeholder perspectives on social work admission can help inform FBU's admission practices. Administrators at FBU demonstrate high levels of openness, a strong commitment to learning leadership, and the use of data-driven decision making. Therefore, it appears that FBU administrators will be receptive to feedback and recommendations to improve practices in the social work program that result from the proposed study.

Summary

Organizational and leadership context is an important element of problem-based research in educational practice. It follows that scholar-practitioners should examine the settings in which they conduct their research. The researcher applied Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames of organizational analysis to prepare for inquiry within the FBU setting. Accordingly, the scholar-practitioner will be mindful of recent structural changes within the organization. A climate of structural change may signal a time for expansion of successful academic programs to include a new graduate program in social work. However, restrictions on program expenditures and changes in financial management may indicate that program expansion is not feasible in the current environment or will be delayed until the system and its resources are better able to support growth. FBU has undergone significant changes in organizational leadership. University administration continues to lead change efforts that impact structure, human resources, politics/power, and symbolism within the organization. Overall, FBU's new leadership model, marked by openness, learning and reflection, as well as data-driven decision making, seems

highly supportive of evaluative research efforts that can be used to improve educational programming.

SECTION THREE:
SCHOLARLY REVIEW FOR THE STUDY

Introduction

This study investigates admission and gatekeeping in social work education. A review of the extant literature begins by examining the gatekeeping function of program admission. There is a discussion of challenges that social work programs face during admission, namely, with defining academic potential, determining what professional suitability is, understanding the legalities of gatekeeping practices, and meeting accreditation standards. Next, a review of the literature indicates mixed results in the effectiveness of elements commonly used to determine admission for social work programs. In addition, the researcher presents perceptions of gatekeeping and admission from the perspectives of faculty, field instructors, and social services employers. Then, a review considers the multiple ethical obligations that social work faculty have when administering program admission. The discussion concludes by exploring issues of social justice and access to higher education in the administration of social work program admission.

Gatekeeping at Admission

Professional gatekeeping is defined as “preventing the graduation of students who are not equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and values for professional practice” (Koerin & Miller, 1995, p. 247). Gatekeeping is a continual process that begins at admission, or in some baccalaureate programs, preadmission (Moore & Urwin, 1990). For example, BSW students often take introductory courses in the social work curriculum and then pursue formal admission into the major. For graduate programs, admission is a first screening device to the social work profession (Moore & Urwin, 1990). Thus, social

work programs and faculty maintain the first line of professional gatekeeping (Cole, 1991; Tam & Kwok, 2007).

After admission, the gatekeeping process continues through evaluation of students' coursework, admission to field education, field practicum, exit examination, and graduation (Moore & Urwin, 1990), with questions of professional suitability at each juncture (Curren & Atherton, 2008). Goals of gatekeeping are "quality control, program integrity, and protection of those seeking services from graduates" (Madden, 2000, p. 135). The most ethically and academically rigorous approach to gatekeeping is continuous and occurs at multiple steps in the educational process (Gibbs, 2000) and continues through professional licensure (Born & Carroll, 1988). This section will consider the gatekeeping functions of social work admission by examining the purpose of selective admission and presenting the prominent philosophies of admission gatekeeping. It will conclude with a review of common admission and gatekeeping policy practices in social work programs.

Purpose of Selective Admission

"The [social work] admissions process is the mechanism for attracting students who learn from and contribute to the educational process, have potential for practice, and effectively use communication and personal skills in the educational experience" (Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 124). Admission policies and processes shape the profession of social work by controlling who is allowed access to education and to matriculate into practice following graduation (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002). Gatekeeping's purpose, particularly through admission, is "to develop criteria, guidelines, and procedures by which the profession can maximize the likelihood that those who begin the practice of social work

are capable of interacting with clients, colleagues, and the community in an ethical and competent manner” (Miller & Koerin, 2001, p. 2).

The complexity of admission processes lies in: (a) identifying the professional qualities to use as screening criteria, (b) determining methods for information-gathering for the stated criteria, and (c) identifying the measures to assess students based on the criteria (Gibbs, 1994b). When programs establish admission criteria and the mechanisms by which to measure candidates’ fit, they establish an “admission climate along a continuum from open to exclusive enrollment” (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 295). Selective admission, specifically, serves two purposes: (a) assessing candidates’ academic potential and (b) evaluating candidates’ personal characteristics, or suitability, for the practice of social work (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam & Kwok, 2007; Younes, 1998).

Social work educators are challenged to establish and apply effective screening criteria for program admission (Thomas et al., 2004). Admission processes are highly important, for many social work programs rely on admission standards to screen out students unsuitable to the profession (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). Selectivity in admission should identify students most likely to succeed in social work programs, equipped to meet the challenges of social work practice after graduation (Seipel et al., 2011). During admission, the gatekeeping function includes assessing candidates’ professional potential based upon both academic and personal characteristics—or suitability—for the profession (Tam & Kwok, 2007). Academic criteria are commonly measured through scholastic means, such as GPA and test scores, and personal suitability

is assessed through personal statements, recommendation letters, and interviews (Tam & Kwok, 2007).

In Gibbs' (1994b) landmark study of BSW admission procedures, she found that 66% of programs reported it was very unlikely that applicants are denied admission. Denials, though rare, were primarily due to failure to meet the minimum GPA. Even subtle nuances appear to be highly important in selective social work admission. For example, Pelech et al. (1999) found that students admitted to a master's-level social work program from a waiting list were later identified, in greater proportion, as having educational problems. Furthermore, once admitted, few students are terminated from social work programs, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, whether through dropping out, failed coursework, or practicum disruptions (Born & Carroll, 1988; Gibbs, 1994b; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Peterman & Blake, 1986; Ryan, Habibis, & Craft, 1997). Thus, admission becomes an important juncture for gatekeeping and "maintaining quality control in social work" (Regehr et al., 2001, p. 130).

Admission criteria and procedures are frequently scrutinized retrospectively, particularly when students experience serious problems such as poor academic performance, issues with interpersonal relationships, and failures during field practicum or other coursework (Regehr et al., 2001). Student concerns beg the question: How can admission procedures better detect and prevent problematic students (Regehr et al., 2001)? When students present with problematic behaviors, the pressures for effective selection and admission procedures are increased. However, admission judgments are complicated and are often made "imperfectly" (Regehr et al., 2001, p. 130). Accordingly, social work programs "must continue to search for admission screening

methods that identify those who should not be admitted without excluding those who have much to offer the profession” (Regehr et al., 2001, p. 141). “If educators believe in the value of the social work profession, they must demand that those who enter the profession be worthy of it” (Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 126). Furthermore, “If educators do not guard the gate, they cannot raise higher the status of social work or retain the confidence of society in the profession’s ability to deliver service” (Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 126).

Admission Gatekeeping Philosophies

Philosophically, admission gatekeeping can be conceptualized from two viewpoints: screening-in students or screening-out applicants (Gibbs, 2000; Madden, 2000). Madden (2000) framed the admission process as the opportunity and method for screening-in students to the social work degree and profession. A screening-in philosophy focuses on professional diversity, celebrating the diversity of practitioners and practice settings available in professional social work (Madden, 2000; Moore & Urwin, 1990). By applying theories of human and student development as well as a strengths perspective, a screening-in mentality for admission identifies applicants’ strengths and potential for growth (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Tam & Kwok, 2007), while still using the traditional strategies for assessing candidates’ abilities such as GPA, personal interviews, and human services experience (Madden, 2000). Allowing that professional suitability and character can be “developed through education and practice rather than necessarily being innate” (Holmström, 2014, p. 464) is a cornerstone of screening-in philosophy.

Madden (2000) maintained that program admission is the entrance to the profession, so programs could admit candidates for whom there are concerns, provided that gatekeeping functions at other educational points (such as in coursework and practicum) are functioning. Indeed, Lafrance et al. (2004) posed the important question for admission decisions: Are faculty discerning if students are unsuitable or just unready for social work practice? Rather than viewing candidates as unsuitable for the social work profession, a screening-in philosophy frames students as unprepared—prior to participating in the professional socialization process of their educational experiences. University study is based upon a developmental model for growth, change, and greater understanding of self. Admission guided by a screening-in approach will consider “the potentially transformative nature of social work education” (Holmström, 2014, p. 457) when selecting applicants. From a screening-in philosophy, it is premature to prevent students’ admission when they have not yet had the opportunity to study and practice social work skills (Tam & Kwok, 2007).

Once students are admitted, programs may opt to conduct formal, ongoing student reviews as a form of professional development. Student reviews involve a continuum of activities ranging from advising sessions, evaluation conferences between faculty and students, faculty feedback via formal forms and ratings, and student self-assessments (Moore & Urwin, 1991; Reynolds, 2004). “Helping clients achieve effective social functioning is the aim as social workers. As gatekeepers to the profession, educators must provide the same aid to students choosing a social work career” (Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 119). Still, Madden (2000) was careful to note that screening-in does not equate to open admission. Screening-in implies a supportive educational environment in which

faculty provide honest and direct feedback to students about their performance, where applications are denied, failing grades are assigned for subpar performance, and some students may be counseled out of the social work major (Madden, 2000). There are significant pedagogical implications for programs applying screening-in philosophies. To develop students' professional suitability, coursework should involve character development, with adequate resources for faculty and staff to provide supports such as intensive advising and ongoing student reviews (Holmström, 2014).

In contrast, a screening-out approach “selectively closes the gate” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 150) during the process of social work education at varying points including admission, coursework, or practicum. A heightened approach to gatekeeping through admission will focus on increasing admission standards, specifically GPA, entrance exam scores, interviews, personal statements, references, and screening questionnaires (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Moore & Urwin, 1991; Urwin et al., 2006). Increased admission standards serve a preventative gatekeeping function, denying marginal or unprepared students entry into social work programs. Endorsing a screening-out approach demands that educators delineate what baseline skills and factors of moral character, or suitability, are required of candidates prior to their social work studies—no small undertaking for departments (Holmström, 2014). Arguably, a screening-out position during admission risks excluding students who could succeed since there is inconsistent empirical research support for the predictive values of commonly used admission screening criteria (Madden, 2000).

While the screening-in philosophy embraces a supportive, developmental approach with students, it implies an eventual need for screening-out mechanisms, for not

every student admitted to a social work program will prove a successful candidate. Therefore, a gatekeeping function includes screening-out those candidates deemed unsuitable to the profession (Cole, 1991). Screening-out strategies include counseling out (Gibbs, 2000), ongoing student reviews (Reynolds, 2004), and evaluations of student readiness for practicum (Moore & Urwin, 1991). Student reviews extend beyond “the scope of the assessed curriculum” (Curren & Atherton, 2008, p. 291) using faculty’s interpretation of students’ suitability for the field and addressing personal factors and characterological concerns such as professional commitment and presence, self-awareness, capacity for relationships, emotional and mental capacities, and stress management (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Lafrance et al., 2004; Urwin et al., 2006). Outcomes of student reviews may include various options such as behavior contracts and remediation, voluntary withdrawals, temporary leaves of absence, program dismissals, and conditions for readmission (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Urwin et al., 2006). Screening-out strategies should be student-centered by helping students find better educational and vocational matches for their particular interests, skills, and strengths.

In reality, many programs lack the resources for maintaining a screening-in approach. Fiscal restrictions can limit enrollment numbers, faculty resources for intensive supervision and advising (Morrow, 2000), and the availability of supportive, tutorial, or remediation services for underprepared students (Gibbs, 2000). As previously noted, historical trends and social movements have impacted social work admission practices. Trends of increasing enrollments and decreasing funding and staffing have left programs with limited time and budgets to support remediation efforts, or screening-in strategies, for underprepared applicants (Gibbs, 2000), so screening-out mechanisms are

sometimes applied by necessity. For some programs, screening-out efforts are applied to candidates who meet minimum admission criteria due to the necessity of enrollment caps (Gibbs, 2000) and competition. For these programs, admission procedures involve “framing and weighting fair, valid, and reliable criteria that can select, from any group of students, those who demonstrate the greatest potential to become professional social workers” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 166).

Policy Practices in Admission and Gatekeeping

Discussions about admission and gatekeeping necessarily include aspects of policymaking. Gatekeeping policies include admission criteria and procedures as well as academic and conduct standards for continuing students. Policymaking in this arena is often a challenge for social work programs. As a policy concern, few programs have clearly delineated screening criteria for professional suitability (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Gibbs, 1994b; Koerin & Miller, 1995). Often, admission and gatekeeping policies in social work programs are “poorly defined and inconsistent” (Younes, 1998, p. 147). Urwin et al. (2006) reported that 75% of faculty members believe “gatekeeping is easier to talk about than to do, [and] that their schools had little in writing about criteria related to professional behavior” (p. 176). Historically, social work programs have been slow to establish screening-out policies. In surveys of social work programs in the United States and Canada, over 60% of responding programs had not established formal screening-out policies (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Gibbs, 1994b; Koerin & Miller, 1995). Lack of departmental policy (Tam & Kwok, 2007), along with low institutional support (Ryan et al., 1997), has discouraged faculty from engaging in gatekeeping after admission, making admission decisions all the more crucial (Tam, 2003).

The *2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate and Master's Social Work Programs* require programs to submit their policies and procedures related to student retention and termination (Council on Social Work Education, 2015b). The importance of having written gatekeeping policies cannot be overstated. In a national survey of BSW program directors, Gibbs (1994a) found differences in how program directors with/without written gatekeeping policies responded to students with problems. First, both groups rated the same reasons for counseling out an unsuitable BSW student, which was nonconformity to social values and ethics, emotional/mental health problems, and inability to respect/accept human diversity. Programs with written gatekeeping policies were more likely to counsel out students who do not conform to social work values and ethics, along with students whose personal values are inconsistent with social work values. It appears that established policies empower faculty to act on gatekeeping activities, or alternatively, faculty who enact policies are more likely to be active gatekeepers.

Elpers and Fitzgerald (2013) offered a theoretical framework using accreditation standards, competencies, and practices behaviors to inform gatekeeping policies and practices at admission and continuing through field practicum. Faculty can use the gatekeeping conceptual framework to develop screening tools, individualized according to programs' specific missions and curricular designs. With accreditation standards and social work's professional code of ethics as guides to frame "effective academic standards...that relate to expected professional behaviors" (Gibbs, 2000, p. 161), screening criteria for social work admission could include self-awareness, interpersonal interactions, critical thinking, communication skills, receptivity to feedback, use of

supervision, and respect for diversity and clients' rights (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013; Gibbs, 2000; Hagar, 2000; Tam & Coleman, 2009).

Adding to the complexity of gatekeeping policy, there are multiple policy guidelines that may address student performance at each gatekeeping point (Urwin et al., 2006). Poor grades, for example, are governed by university policies for academic probation or suspension. Cheating and plagiarism are under the auspices of university academic integrity policies. Student violations of university conduct, such as law violations on campus, are addressed by codes of student conduct overseen by the university. Accordingly, gatekeeping policies that address professional suitability should be coordinated and consistent with other applications of university policies and procedures. As a professional program, social work must frame professional and ethical behaviors as academic problems rather than relying solely on student conduct standards that are more limited in scope and governed by other branches of the university (Lafrance et al., 2004).

Admission is a context-specific activity that ideally reflects university mission and history; legislative (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013) or denominational mandates; program mission (Miller & Koerin, 1998), curriculum, and faculty governance; student development; community needs; and faculty's own attitudes about gatekeeping (Gibbs & Blakely, 2000). Universities operate in a hierarchical system; therefore, it is imperative for social work programs to have administrative support for gatekeeping policies (Urwin et al., 2006). Rigorous admission and gatekeeping policies could reduce numbers of students with problem behaviors, a feat likely achieved at the cost of decreased enrollments and tuition revenues, which risks loss of administrative support if

enrollments decline. Policymaking for admission and gatekeeping is a demanding responsibility for faculty that requires the involvement of multiple stakeholder and constituency groups. Therefore, social work faculty should be sensitive to the importance of program context in admission and gatekeeping.

At this point, it is important to note briefly a key difference in admission processes for undergraduate versus graduate programs. In undergraduate social work programs, students regularly take prerequisite courses, such as introduction to social work, human diversity, and introductory social policy classes, before formally applying to the major (Gibbs, 1994b; Kropf, 2000; Peterman & Blake, 1986; Reynolds, 2004). Such courses often include mandatory volunteer or service learning experiences that, at times, confirm students' vocational calling to social work and, other times, allow students the opportunity to self-select from the major (Kropf, 2000; Moore & Urwin, 1990). With BSW introductory classes, faculty members are able to build relationships with students (Morrow, 2000) and have the gatekeeping opportunity to screen candidates through academic advising and coursework (Moore & Urwin, 1991; Reynolds, 2004). Formal admission processes, such as academic criteria and screening mechanisms, are typically quite similar for undergraduate and graduate programs (Moore & Urwin, 1991). This review of admission and gatekeeping literature will include both BSW and MSW programs. Where applicable, any differential findings between the two programs will be noted in the discussion.

Much social work literature is dedicated to discussion about the need for professional gatekeeping. Program admission is considered the first point of gatekeeping; however, the study of social work admission, specifically, is more limited in

scope. In 2003, Barlow and Coleman noted that “although the literature highlights the dilemmas [of gatekeeping], little information is available that actually describes the criteria and mechanisms established to screen students” (p. 154). Over 10 years later, this statement still rings true in social work education. Cole and Lewis (1993) suggested social work programs can decrease the number of students who subsequently present with problem behaviors by creating and applying clearly defined admission policies and procedures. “Perhaps we [social work educators] would be less reluctant to make tough decisions to deny admission or terminate a student’s enrollment if we were secure in our ability to do so in a systemic and equitable way” (Miller & Koerin, 1998, p. 449). It becomes an issue of data-informed decision making (Marsh et al., 2006) for social work programs to establish the predictive value of admission criteria for later student success in order to inform policymaking about admission. As Cole (1991) extolled, social work educators must make difficult decisions to define and enforce gatekeeping policies if they are to meet their ethical obligations to the profession.

Challenges in Social Work Admission

In this section, the literature review will address common challenges in the administration of social work admission. Decision making for selective screening and admission involves a complexity of issues including students’ interests and rights, faculty obligations and responsibilities, educational integrity, institutional policies and reputation, professional standards of practice, social work values and ethics, and legalities (Gibbs & Macy, 2000). Faculty’s reticence to formalize gatekeeping policies can be related to the multiple challenges that present during program admission. Screening students will always entail levels of uncertainty and imperfect process, as social work

faculty develop gatekeeping procedures that are fair to students as well as protect future clients (Sowbel, 2012). Accordingly, “we must maintain a commitment to persevere through our uncertainty and discomfort with the innate dueling values that inform being a social worker while gatekeeping for the profession” (Sowbel, 2012, p. 39). Here, the common challenges encountered during social work admission will be explored, beginning with a discussion about academic skills contrasted with professional traits, professional suitability, and legal implications.

Academic Criteria for Social Work Admission

Social work programs commonly evaluate applicants based upon scholastic performance and evidence of professional behaviors. Scholastic performance is measured through traditional academic criteria including grades, test scores, and writing skills (Gibbs, 1994a, 1994b; Koerin & Miller, 1995). Professional behaviors include personal traits and values consistent with the field of social work and, by some, have been referred to as nonacademic factors (Koerin & Miller, 1995). These professional behaviors are often measured through candidates’ personal statements, reference letters, and personal interviews (Koerin & Miller, 1995). Distinguishing personal and professional behaviors as nonacademic criteria is flawed, however (Miller & Koerin, 1998). Professional skills, traits, and values should be considered academic criteria; a separate conceptualization of personal/professional criteria as nonacademic is a conceptual misnomer (Tam & Kwok, 2007). The necessity of academic criteria including not only standards of scholastic performance, but also professional behaviors, has been established among social work educators (Cole & Lewis, 2000; Coyle et al., 2011; Gibbs & Blakely, 2000; Tam & Coleman, 2009). From the early years of social work

education, faculty identified the need to evaluate and ensure that students espouse social work values and principles (Moore & Jenkins, 2000). A candidate's personal traits and professional skill set are also referred to as professional suitability, referring "to positive social work practice qualities that reflect appropriate standards of professional conduct" (Coyle et al., 2011, p. 542). "In professional programs such as social work, academic performance includes grades, classroom attendance and performance, ethical behavior, and psychological well-being sufficient to work productively with clients" (Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 121). Furthermore, defining academic criteria to include standards for both scholastic and professional behaviors has been successfully defended in case law (Madden & Cobb, 2000). As Gibbs and Blakely (2000) asserted, there are no nonacademic standards.

Despite much discussion in social work literature about the value and importance of evaluating applicants' professional skills at admission, social work programs rely most heavily on scholastic standards, such as GPA, for admission decisions (Gibbs, 1994b). In Ryan et al.'s (1997) study, baccalaureate department chairs ranked factors they believed demonstrate students' competence for entry-level social work practice. The two lowest-ranked items were GPA and standardized test scores. Yet, department chairs reported using these as the most common measures for academic potential and ability for social work admission. Seipel et al. (2011) conducted a study comparing perceptions of MSW admission chairs and social service agency administrators about traits influencing successful social work students. Findings were similar to Ryan et al., with both faculty and agency administrators ranking academic records as low importance. Highly ranked traits were categorized into two domains: (a) cognitive skills including critical thinking,

problem solving, and creativity and (b) personal traits including leadership, social awareness, and maturity. While academic criteria are primary predictors of success in graduate study, they are imperfect for screening applicants, at which juncture personal qualities must also be considered during admission screenings (Fortune, 2003; Seipel et al., 2011). Both cognitive and personal skills are necessary for academic and professional success in social work; both domains should be considered for balanced admission decisions (Seipel et al., 2011).

During admission, programs do elicit information about candidates' personal and professional traits, typically through screening mechanisms of personal statements, reference letters, and interviews (Koerin & Miller, 1995). In a national survey of MSW programs, 85% of respondents indicated that admission screenings sought information about personal and professional traits, defined as factors outside grades, standardized test scores, and writing ability (Miller & Koerin, 1998). Nevertheless, only 24% of those respondents described actual admission screening criteria (such as honesty) rather than screening mechanisms (such as a reference letter). In an informal review of reference forms for MSW program applications, Seipel et al. (2011) found most forms inquired more about personal qualities, including emotional stability, self-understanding, dependability, and integrity, than cognitive abilities such as writing and intellectual skills. When developing admission criteria that address professional qualities, programs have difficulty establishing agreed upon attributes and then evaluating whether candidates exhibit the requisite characteristics, particularly into easily quantifiable measures like traditional scholastic standards such as grades and test scores (Gibbs & Blakely, 2000;

Miller & Koerin, 1998). Programs lack the “operationalization of nonacademic criteria for admission to social work education” (Miller & Koerin, 2001, p. 3).

Within the field of social work, the view of promising candidates is not limited to high GPA. Social work’s professional values of diversity and social justice have influenced a more holistic view toward admission criteria (Pelech et al., 1999). Social workers must demonstrate fundamental theoretical knowledge, along with practice skills such as the ability to form relationships, show empathy, and demonstrate ethical conduct (Thomas et al., 2004). If programs overly focus on scholastic achievements at admission screenings, educators may overlook important skill sets and qualities needed for professional social work practice (Gibbs & Macy, 2000). For example, gatekeeping is particularly challenging when a scholastically gifted student performs poorly in field education or a student who performs marginally scholastically is skilled in practice (Koerin & Miller, 1995). How do social work programs strike a balance in assessing both scholastic and personal traits as academic admission standards?

Perhaps scholastic requirements serve as a minimum floor for social work admission, and then screenings of professional traits should be applied. Seipel et al. (2011) suggested that personal attributes contribute more to practice success than educational accomplishment. Notably, their study found that cognitive skills, operationalized as critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity, were also highly valued in social work employees by agency administrators. It seems likely that a combination of abilities is necessary, wherein a successful practitioner has requisite theoretical knowledge of social work and sound helping skills, along with personal traits that contribute to relationship-building and ethical conduct. Accordingly, both scholastic

and personal traits should be conceptualized, measured, and assessed during admission, with all components considered academic criteria for social work study. The challenge for social work educators is the difficulty of consistently defining, measuring, and assessing traits of personal suitability (Dillon, 2007).

Professional Suitability at Social Work Admission

Social work pedagogy is delineated into a trinity of professional knowledge, values, and skills. Knowledge encompasses social workers' mastery of theoretical constructs. Skills include interpersonal abilities to engage and work with people. Finally, professional values "reflect the need for social workers to ascribe to a set of humanitarian beliefs and standards of professional conduct" (Manktelow & Lewis, 2005, p. 299). Successful students will demonstrate social work knowledge, skills in building and sustaining interpersonal relationships, application of professional values, and compliance with professional ethics (Tam & Coleman, 2009).

Social work literature has established that personal traits, professional skills, and values are considered academic criteria in social work programs. As such, personal and professional qualities are considered constructs of professional suitability, including "more than the student's acquisition of a knowledge or skill base; factors such as personal characteristics, values, and personal experiences" (Miller & Koerin, 2001, p. 2). A somewhat elusive concept, professional suitability refers to one's personal fit with social work's professional values and the ability to "perform a social work role" (Barlow & Coleman, 2003, p. 155). In essence, suitability embodies the desired skills, personal traits, and behaviors of professional social workers. Substantial social work literature endorses the concept of professional suitability and the need to assess students' fit with

social work's professional values and behaviors (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Curren & Atherton, 2008; Lafrance et al., 2004; Sowbel & Miller, 2015; Tam & Coleman, 2009). In practice, though, educators' gatekeeping efforts become mired by the challenges of defining professional suitability, establishing clear criteria of professional suitability standards, and then finding effective mechanisms by which to measure candidates' professional suitability.

Studies of professional unsuitability identify problematic personal and professional traits deemed undesirable among social work candidates and practitioners. "An unsuitable student... exhibits emotional or mental instability that poses a risk of harm to the student or to potential clients or whose values are in clear and direct conflict with those of the social work profession" (Madden, 2000, p. 141). Overall, there is consensus among social work educators, field instructors, and practitioners on professional unsuitability in three general categories: (a) illegal activities; (b) unethical conduct, failing to adhere to social work values and violations of the *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*; and (c) personal instability due to mental health and/or substance abuse which impedes student functioning (Koerin & Miller, 1995; Lafrance et al., 2004; Miller & Koerin, 1998). Illegal activity includes current commission of criminal acts, falsifying application materials, or dishonestly about history (Koerin & Miller, 1995; Lafrance et al., 2004), and specifically offenses such as assault and fraud that would prevent future employment or impugn the profession (Lafrance et al., 2004).

In a large, mixed-methods study with social work field instructors, Tam and Coleman (2009) distinguished professional suitability into five categories: (a) personal

suitability, (b) practice suitability, (c) ethical suitability, (d) interpersonal suitability, and (e) social consciousness. Of the five areas, personal suitability was rated as the most important aspect of professional suitability by field instructors (by 30.6% of respondents). Personal suitability encompassed personal awareness of one's strengths/weaknesses, commitment to professional growth, empathy, genuine caring toward others, self-management of personal issues, passion for the social work profession, and openness/receptivity to feedback. In a small, grounded theory study with field instructors, Lafrance et al.'s (2004) findings were similar, noting that maturity, honesty, integrity, empathy, respect, and comfort with emotions were desirable traits among social work students and practitioners. Also necessary were the capacity for building self-awareness, resolving personal issues, and gaining insight into one's choice of social work as a career, consistent with Miller and Koerin's (1998) findings in a survey of MSW program directors. Next, practice suitability included competent intervention skills and a sound theoretical knowledge base (Tam & Coleman, 2009). Ethical suitability embodied adherence to social work ethics, honesty, and integrity (Lafrance et al., 2004; Tam & Coleman, 2009).

Additionally, field instructors have observed that students must demonstrate interpersonal suitability, the ability to build and sustain professional relationships through appropriate dress, speech, demeanor, comportment, and body language (Lafrance et al., 2004; Tam & Coleman, 2009). Finally, field instructors identified a need for social consciousness (Tam & Coleman, 2009), a worldview consistent with social work values including an ability "to examine the personal values, beliefs and biases they bring to the profession" (Lafrance et al., 2004, p. 336). Over 75% of the respondents in Lafrance

et al.'s (2004) study noted a "commitment to social justice as fundamental to the profession of social work" (p. 336). Field instructors (and MSW program directors) were highly concerned when students failed to discern, understand, or attempt to intervene in problems with larger social and organizational systems (Lafrance et al., 2004; Miller & Koerin, 1998). Gibbs (1994a) surveyed program directors at the baccalaureate level about professional suitability and yielded similar results. BSW program directors ranked ethical behavior, respect and acceptance of human diversity, and congruence of personal and professional social work values as the three most important factors ensuring graduates' competence. In their study, Tam and Coleman (2009) found that the highest-rated single criterion for professional suitability was adherence to social work values and ethics.

Holmström (2014) has advocated for renewed focus on candidates' personal character in social work education, arguing that personal suitability and intellectual capacity are equally important and "not competing priorities" (p. 452). Furthermore, "characteristics such as sound judgment and wisdom...are surely dependent upon both intellectual strengths and moral character" (Holmström, 2014, p. 452). Nevertheless, using values and personal characteristics as suitability criteria for social work admission is still without full acceptance among some faculty (Ryan et al., 1997). There appears to be greater consensus about unsuitability, when clear personal impairments prevent practice, as compared to defining suitability, over which many faculty still grapple with what the concept exactly entails (Miller & Koerin, 1998). If, as most social work educators seem to espouse, admission should have a bifurcated definition of academic potential including both scholastic and personal/professional abilities, then faculty must

clearly identify those traits and the means by which to measure and evaluate them. Subsequently, the already difficult process of admission is further complicated by determining at what level candidates should possess professional qualities *before* their social work education commences (Royse, 2000), for it is “fallacious to require outcome performance at entry” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 159). Rather than limiting character to an outcomes disposition of social work education, programs should assess candidates’ character at some level during admission, for students have contact with clients through practicum or experiential classroom activities early in their educational experiences, and clients cannot be placed at risk of harm (Holmström, 2014).

Program directors cite the challenge of defining professional suitability as the most difficult reason for terminating BSW students from current participation in a program (Gibbs, 1994a). Ryan et al. (1997) reported similar findings, with BSW directors citing the top difficulties in terminating students for professional unsuitability as inability to define adequately the concept of professional suitability and the inability to formulate specific, concrete criteria of unsuitability. As Lafrance et al. (2004) suggested, “although the personal qualities and characteristics formed prior to arriving at the portals of the profession are of critical importance for the practice of social work, these criteria are the least attended to in the admission process” (p. 329). Because students’ personal characteristics are so highly regarded by field instructors, practitioners, and faculty (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Gibbs, 2000; Holmström, 2014; Lafrance et al., 2004; Seipel et al., 2011; Tam & Coleman, 2009), it would seem that social work educators should evaluate applicants’ personal skills and values during the admission process. As Gibbs (1994a) noted, when ethical and characterological problems exist, raising scholastic

requirements such as minimal grades and test scores is not the gatekeeping answer. Rather, social work educators should identify and focus on the connections between intellectual and personal characteristics during admission processes (Holmström, 2014). Screening for constructs of professional suitability, namely personal, practice, ethical, and interpersonal skills (Tam & Coleman, 2009), should begin at admission and continue through coursework and practicum.

As previously noted, few social work programs enforce professional suitability policies for enrolled students (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Gibbs, 1994b; Koerin & Miller, 1995), relying, instead, on admission procedures or practicum for screening of professional unsuitability (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). Because qualities of professional suitability are subjective in nature (Koerin & Miller, 1995), without fully shared agreement among faculty on just what professional suitability means (Miller & Koerin, 1998), screening and admitting candidates at admission is complicated. The stakes are high in social work education. As of October 2015, there were 750 accredited baccalaureate and graduate social work programs in the United States (Council on Social Work Education, 2015a). Gibbs and Macy (2000) offered this sobering illustration: If every accredited social work program matriculates just one student unsuitable to the profession each year, in mere years, the number of unsuitable practitioners becomes a problem of enormous magnitude. Consequently, admission standards are important to help identify “highly motivated, capable individuals who can work effectively with clients who have multifaceted problems” (Younes, 1998, p. 150). Social work is a diverse profession with a myriad of practice areas, which opens opportunities for practitioners who offer a variety of skill sets and personal strengths (Moore & Urwin,

1990). Thus, evaluating candidates' *potential* for professional suitability becomes a challenging function during admission to social work programs (Miller & Koerin, 1998).

Legal Implications for Admission and Gatekeeping

Universities and faculty have authority to determine criteria and suitability for admission to social work programs (Cole & Lewis, 1993; Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013). In turn, social work faculty are empowered to enact traditional academic discipline and dismissals, such as failing grades and academic dishonesty, but they have additional responsibilities to oversee sanctions for ethical violations and clinical incompetency (Madden & Cobb, 2000). Case law established through the United States Supreme Court has upheld universities' rights to "establish noncognitive academic requirements for graduation and has consistently deferred to faculties' professional judgment of clinical competency," allowing social work educators "to evaluate students' technical and interpersonal skills as well as their professional character and behavior" (Madden & Cobb, 2000, p. 172). Courts have recognized educators' expertise and capacity to assess students' clinical abilities. While faculty have gatekeeping authority, they should ensure that students' rights are protected by enacting clear departmental policies and procedures that articulate minimum professional standards, informing students of competency requirements, and attending to due process (Madden & Cobb, 2000).

When administering program admission, social work educators should be cognizant of legal issues that impact school policies and procedures (Cole, 1991). Many faculty fear legal repercussions and, thus, avoid gatekeeping functions (Gibbs, 1994a). By informing themselves about legal guidelines for admission, social work faculty can successfully fulfill their admission gatekeeping role by identifying suitable applicants

both equitably and fairly (Cole, 1991). To this end, there are three areas of law and legal theory that pertain to maintaining legal compliance in social work admission procedures: (a) arbitrary and capricious decisions, (b) contract theory, and (c) discrimination (Cole, 1991).

As long as admission standards are reasonable, fair, and not arbitrary or capricious, the courts have supported university and faculty decision making for admission to professional programs (Cole, 1991). In a case ruling about medical school admission, the West Virginia Supreme Court wrote:

Initial responsibility for determining competence and suitability of persons to engage in professional careers lies with professional schools themselves; as long as conduct of educators is not high-handed, arbitrary or capricious, educators should be left alone to do their job without interference from the judiciary, which has neither the expertise nor insight to evaluate their decisions. (*North v. West Virginia Board of Regents*, 1985, p. 142)

In addition, the courts have upheld the use of admission interviews and written recommendations for professional schools, so long as the processes are fairly administered, without discriminatory practices, with notice provided to applicants. Contract theory requires that programs comply with their published admission criteria and processes (Cole, 1991; Cole & Lewis, 2000). Admission criteria must be clearly defined and made available to all applicants. Case law supports that professional behavior in clinical and practice settings are academic requirements and educational components of training in professional programs. In several cases, courts have maintained that admission to professional schools is not a constitutional right, as long as

admission criteria are not arbitrary or unreasonable and do not discriminate (Cole & Lewis, 2000). For example, if programs conduct personal interviews at admission, then screening criteria based on those interviews must be clearly identified and equally and uniformly applied to all candidates.

Of course, programs admission criteria should not be discriminatory. Professional gatekeeping becomes challenging when there are some disabilities that may “render an individual incapable of social work practice, unable to service clients ethically, knowledgeably and/or skillfully” (Cole, 1991, Discrimination section, para. 1) such as active mental health or substance abuse problems. Programs may not inquire about applicants’ mental or physical health during preadmission (Cole & Lewis, 2000). A disorder or diagnosis, alone, does not constitute grounds for denying admission or dismissal if students can meet professional standards and program rules and successfully participate in the social work educational program (Cole, 1991). The Americans with Disability Act does permit programs to inquire about applicants’ abilities to perform essential functions of the social work program (Cole & Lewis, 2000). As such, social work programs should document and publicize the professional and clinical skills and criteria essential to social work study and practice (Cole, 1991; Huff & Hodges, 2010). “Uniformly developed and equally applied, these [admission] criteria, including those more subjective judgments made in interviews, will assist educators to avoid unfortunate [legal] consequences” (Cole, 1991, Conclusion section, para. 3).

Several issues of gatekeeping have been addressed successfully in court cases, including academic standards, clinical competency, disabilities, professional aptitude, behavior and ethical conduct (Cole & Lewis, 2000). From a legal perspective, case law

has demonstrated that professional programs must define academic criteria to include standards for scholastic achievement as well as professional behaviors (Gibbs & Blakely, 2000). At a basic level, programs should follow their published criteria for admission, honor admission decisions, and establish standards that do not discriminate (Cole, 1991). Establishing and adhering to clear admission policies can empower faculty and alleviate fear of litigation while administering admission and professional gatekeeping (Younes, 1998).

Predictive Values of Social Work Admission Criteria

During admission, social work departments wrestle with several complicated issues: defining and measuring applicants' potential for academic and professional suitability, trying to recruit and retain diverse student groups, and gatekeeping (Campbell et al., 2013). "Social work admission criteria are used to ensure student academic competence, identify personal characteristics associated with success in social work education and practice, predict success in class and field work, and promote diversity of the study body" (Coyle et al., 2011, p. 538). Therefore, programs are challenged to establish admission criteria, standards, and procedures that reasonably predict candidates' abilities, program success, and professional conduct upon graduation (Cole, 1991; Dunlap et al., 1998).

To assess candidates, social work programs typically establish multiple admission criteria. Here, an important distinction is noted between the means of application and the admission criteria those mechanisms seek to measure (Miller & Koerin, 1998). Common admission criteria include (a) academic potential measured through past scholastic performance, (b) personal suitability, and (c) work or volunteer experience in human

services (Coyle et al., 2011). Admission criteria are regularly measured through application mechanisms such as GPA, exam scores, personal statements, personal interviews, and letters of reference (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Coyle et al., 2011). Consistently, academic records are the most commonly used mechanisms to assess admission criteria for social work programs (Gibbs, 1994b; Ryan et al., 1997). Academic records include GPA, exam scores, credit hours, and in BSW programs, candidates' performance in introductory, preadmission courses (Gibbs, 1994b). Academic ability and potential tend to be most highly valued among the various admission criteria used by social work programs, while personal qualities, or suitability, are ranked and weighted lowest (Ryan et al., 1997).

As Pelech et al. (1999) noted, "The relationship between admissions criteria and subsequent student performance has been a concern of schools of social work for at least 30 years" (Background section, para. 1). Research that evaluates predictive value of commonly used admission criteria and candidates' later success in social work programs has resulted in inconsistent findings (Thomas et al., 2004). The studies have been conducted primarily as retrospectives and mostly limited to small samples in one university setting. Empirical studies have typically defined students' academic success in terms of social work GPA (at various points, such as graduation or end of first year of study) or field practicum ratings; these measures have served as dependent variables. Independent variables have varied to include the common measures of admission criteria, such as preadmission GPA, entrance exam scores, personal statements, interviews, and prior human services work or volunteer experience. In this section, a review of the

literature will present findings on admission measures and their effectiveness for predicting student success in social work programs.

Grade Point Average

GPA is a widely accepted measure of academic abilities and achievement (Gibbs, 1994a). In both undergraduate and graduate social work programs, the primary admission indicator is GPA (Tam, 2003). Because of the challenges in measuring personal and professional suitability characteristics, social work educators rely heavily upon scholastic criteria when evaluating candidates at admission screenings (Gibbs, 1994a, 1994b). Often, GPA is the lone criterion for admission to some baccalaureate social work programs (Gibbs, 1994b). While the heavy reliance on scholastic criteria can be construed as a narrow approach to social work admission or “the gatekeeping path of least resistance” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 158), there appears to be merit in the use of GPA to predict candidates’ success in a social work program.

Overall, research indicates that preadmission GPA, whether UGPA for graduate students or preadmission GPA for undergraduates, does predict students’ academic success in social work programs (Coyle et al., 2011; Dunlap et al., 1998; Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Schmidt, 2007). Multiple studies have found preadmission GPA to be significantly correlated with GPA performance in the social work program. In research specifically pertaining to MSW programs, UGPA has been significantly correlated to first-year graduate GPA (Fortune, 2003; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Pelech et al., 1999; Thomas et al., 2004), final GPA (Watson & Rycraft, 2010), and comprehensive examination scores (Dunlap et al., 1998). The correlations were medium to strong, for example, $r = .411, p < .001$ (Thomas et al., 2004), $r = .4323, p < .001$ (Pelech et al.,

1999), and $\beta = .226, p = .017$ (Watson & Rycraft, 2010). Furthermore, Pelech et al.'s (1999) study that focused on graduate students experiencing problems during their social work studies had, on average, lower UGPAs. In a study of a BSW program, Schmidt (2007) found preadmission GPA as the only reliable criterion that predicted later academic success defined as graduation GPA, though a more modest relationship ($r = .274, p = .001$). However, key to this discussion becomes the operationalization of *success* in a social work program and how it is measured. Surprisingly, some studies have found no significant relationship between UGPA and graduate students' performance in field education (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Thomas et al., 2004). A gap in the literature is that not all empirical studies identified dependent variables that included the measures of GPA, practicum performance ratings, *and* student withdrawal and termination outcomes, at which point issues of personal suitability are often germane. Presumably, poor performance in practicum should be reflected in students' GPAs, though grade inflation may dilute the usefulness of GPA as an outcome indicator (Fortune, 2003; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Miller, 2014; Sowbel, 2011; Watson & Rycraft, 2010).

Entrance Exam Scores

Another scholastic criterion often used in admission selection for graduate programs is Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores. GRE scores have been found significantly correlated to MSW academic performance measured by first-year GPA, though the effect size modest with $r = .266, p < .03$ (Thomas et al., 2004), and comprehensive exam score (Dunlap et al., 1998). Dunlap et al. (1998) argued that GRE scores were as useful as UGPA for predicting graduate performance ($r = .420, p < .001$).

Further, it is noted that the authors chose comprehensive exam scores as their outcome measure, reasoning that comprehensive exam scores were typically higher in variability than course grades. In Thomas et al.'s (2004) study, the admission process calculated a total measure of an applicant's intellectual and academic potential by scoring UGPA, GRE results, and other academic skills such as problem-solving and writing ability demonstrated in the candidates' personal statements. Interestingly, while UGPA and GRE scores were not individually correlated with students' field performance, the total calculated score for intellectual and academic potential was significantly correlated to field performance with a modest effect size of $r = .209$, $p < .209$ (Thomas et al., 2004).

Personal Statements

Social work programs commonly require personal statements in the admission and selection process (Gibbs, 1994b; Miller & Koerin, 1998; Ryan et al., 1997). The personal statement is unique among admission selection mechanisms as it combines assessment of both academic and professional suitability (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002). In personal statements, candidates' academic skills may be evaluated through demonstration of organization, writing and critical thinking skills, and their professional suitability through self-reflection, narrative examples, self disclosure, understanding of social work, and connection with social work values (Coyle et al., 2011; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Munro, 1995). Challenges in using personal statements to assess admission criteria include scoring subjectivity, inter-rater reliability, and consistency (Fortune, 2003; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002).

In studies of MSW programs, faculty's ratings of candidates' personal statements alone were not significantly correlated to academic success measured by graduate GPA

or practicum outcomes (Fortune, 2003; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Pelech et al., 1999). However, Munro (1995) did find a significant correlation between faculty ratings of candidates' personal statements and their final exam scores. In two admission studies where candidates were granted overall application scores, based upon multiple application components such as UGPA, interviews, and suitability, the correlation between faculty ratings and students' GPAs was significant at $r = .39$ (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002). A stepwise multiple regression found faculty ratings to be predictive of students' GPAs with $t = 2.425$; $p = .0193$ (Pelech et al., 1999). Students ranked highest in the category of suitability were the most likely to perform successfully in the program and were the least likely to develop problems during their studies (Pelech et al., 1999). Two studies have noted that students who were admitted with marginal admission scores, were admitted from the waiting list, or had applied to the program multiple times often developed problems (Pelech et al., 1999; Watson, 2002).

In a continuation of Pelech et al.'s (1999) study about MSW students who encountered problems during their program (defined as practicum disruptions, poor academic performance, or problems with forming and maintaining interpersonal relationships), faculty members evaluated applications retrospectively in a blind review in an attempt to predict which applicants later developed problems during their studies (Regehr et al., 2001). Predictions of the faculty reviews were accurate at rates of 64-76% for students with problems and 79% for students without problems (Regehr et al., 2001). The authors concluded "there may be qualitative differences between the personal statements of some students who are later seen as having difficulties and those who are not so perceived" (Regehr et al., 2001, p. 139). However, faculty evaluations of

applicants' personal statements "are far from perfect at identifying students who may potentially present problems by their admission data alone" (Regehr et al., 2001, p. 140). Therefore, GlenMaye and Oakes (2002) concluded that additional measures, such as UGPA and GRE scores, are necessary for holistic admission assessment and advocated for an admission process that includes multiple mechanisms that measure several criteria of professional suitability.

Candidate Interviews

Admission interviews are also used to measure candidates' personal suitability for social work by asking about their commitment to the profession and social justice, motivation to be a social worker, and self-reflection on why social work is a professional fit (Coyle et al., 2011). Proponents of personal interviews highlight the utility of assessing students' fit with social work values and observing their personal traits and interpersonal skills (Dillon, 2007; Seipel et al., 2011; Tam, 2003; Watson, 2002). Nevertheless, there is little research support for the predictive value of faculty's ratings of candidates' performances in admission interviews.

In two studies, faculty's ratings of candidate interviews showed no correlation with subsequent performance in the social work program (Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Munro, 1995). In Holmström and Taylor's (2008b) study, students who later encountered problems were among the candidates who rated well during interviews. Despite studies showing their limited predictive value and the risk of discriminatory practices, many universities have been slow to relinquish use of the personal interview for program admission (Bridge, 1996). Limitations of interviews include unclear agendas, lack of standardized rating scales or training in their use, subjective individual

assessments based on reviewers' interactions with candidates, and interviewer bias (Bridge, 1996; Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Watson, 2002). If a program uses interviews, they should utilize, as Bridge (1996) noted, equal opportunity interview techniques with trained interviewers using standardized questions interacting with all candidates in a systematic way. Safeguards also include panels of interviewers who represent a range of inclusive characteristics such as gender, age, and ethnicity (Bridge, 1996). Candidate interviews are a time-intensive, high-resource endeavor (Watson, 2002). While it may be argued that interviews serve their function by screening unsuitable candidates *before* they enter a social work program (Bridge, 1996), are the interviews worth the cost of time and program resources (Watson, 2002)?

Reference Letters

Reference information can inform faculty about candidates' academic readiness and personal suitability as letters may be prepared by professors, academic advisors, employers, or volunteer supervisors (Coyle et al., 2011). Similar to the use of interviews and personal statements, reference letters are often critiqued because they lack standardization and objectivity and their predictive values are questionable (Thomas et al., 2004). Multiple studies have found no difference between reference ratings of successful students and those who develop problems during their social work studies (Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Munro, 1995; Pelech et al., 1999), while Thomas et al. (2004) found that quality of reference materials was significantly correlated with students' field performance ($r = .376, p < .002$), but not in their first-year graduate GPA.

Social work educators have questioned the utility of recommendation letters since references rarely criticize candidates (Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Munro, 1995;

Watson, 2002). In one admission study, the researcher excluded references as a variable because the recommendations “rarely say anything critical of students and so it is not easy to use them to differentiate strong and weak applicants” (Munro, 1995, p. 25). The use of references is further complicated by potential issues of gender bias. In Seipel’s (1988) study of reference letters, there were indications of differences in reference materials depending upon gender of both the candidate and author. References seemed to describe candidates through “stereotypic views of gender” (Seipel, 1988, p. 162). For example, male references emphasized domains such as leadership, intellect, and motivation for male candidates. Female references, too, stressed traits of intellectual and leadership abilities for male candidates more often than for females. For female candidates, both male and female references focused on social relationships and psychosocial traits. Based upon these findings, admission committees are cautioned to be aware of gender bias in the preparation of recommendation letters as well as in faculty’s interpretation and ratings of letters.

Human Services Experience

At the BSW level, candidates are commonly expected to have completed volunteer experiences prior to admission to serve as a valuable self-selection function to gain firsthand knowledge about the field and insight about the personal fit of social work as a career pursuit (Kropf, 2000; Moore & Urwin, 1990). Conventional wisdom among many social work educators is that students should gain experience in the field before pursuing graduate study, and many programs weight prior work experience heavily during the admission process (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Pelech et al., 1999). However, studies have not significantly correlated prior human

services work experience with successful student outcomes (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Pelech et al., 1999). Students without prior human services work experience have scored significantly higher on MSW comprehensive examinations than students with prior experience, consistent with findings that social work graduate students with prior work experience had lower GPAs and GRE scores upon admission (Dunlap et al., 1998; Pelech et al., 1999). In contrast, Thomas et al. (2004) found that prior human services experience was a modest predictor of students' performance in practicum ($r = .377, p < .001$), but not in students' classroom performance in first-year graduate GPA. Notably, a history of high turnover among human services jobs was associated with students who developed problems during their graduate studies (Pelech et al., 1999). Thus, Pelech et al. (1999) cautioned programs against overly valuing prior work experience that such ratings might overcompensate for poor academic preparation such as UGPA.

Pelech et al. (1999) offered possible explanations for why students with prior work experience may encounter difficulties during graduate study, such as greater adjustment to reassuming a student role while balancing family, work, and school responsibilities. Students with more time in the workforce may be challenged to assume a student status at agency-based practicum. Additionally, the students may be confronted by new coursework that contradicts or invalidates their prior practice experience. Holmström and Taylor (2008b), in a replication of Pelech et al.'s study, suggested that the nature of students' prior work, their supervision experiences, and on-the-job training may also impact their openness to learning, along with their ability for self-reflection and capacity for growth.

Measures of Scholastic Ability and Personal Suitability

Among the commonly used admission criteria for social work programs, it is previous scholastic performance that is most predictive of future academic success. Intellectual and academic potential (measured by preadmission GPA, GRE scores, and academic skills such as problem-solving and writing ability demonstrated in the candidates' personal statements) is significantly correlated with social work GPA and comprehensive exam scores (Coyle et al., 2011; Dunlap et al., 1998; Fortune, 2003; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Munro, 1995; Pelech et al., 1999; Schmidt, 2007; Thomas et al., 2004; Watson & Rycraft, 2010). Predicting social work candidates' success in coursework or practicum by measuring personal suitability at admission through personal statements, interviews, or work experience has inconsistent research support with problems in operationalizing what constitutes suitability, inter-rater reliability, and the evaluation tools used to gather data (Coyle et al., 2011; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002). Social work educators strive for a balanced approach to admission, seeking candidates who can perform both academically and interpersonally, but the research suggests that commonly used application mechanisms have low predictive value for professional suitability.

Perceptions of Gatekeeping in Social Work Education

“Schools of social work are expected to effectively implement the gatekeeping function in order to prevent unsuitable individuals from entering the field of practice” (Tam & Kwok, 2007, p. 195). Gatekeeping roles are filled in multiple ways throughout the progression of a social work career. Social work faculty members serve as the primary professional gatekeepers at admission to educational programs. During field

practicum, field instructors join faculty in assessing students' abilities. After graduation, employers and professional organizations, such as licensing bodies, then serve as gatekeepers to the field (Tam & Kwok, 2007). One way, if not the primary means, of achieving gatekeeping objectives is through selective program admission.

Social work literature often addresses professional gatekeeping with a focus on interventions with continuing students, meaning those who are already admitted to social work programs, more so than on the process of program admission. For example, Urwin et al. (2006) noted several key stakeholder groups from whom to seek feedback when establishing a gatekeeping protocol for continuing students, groups to include faculty, program administrators, field instructors, and students. Royse (2000) expanded the list of constituencies to include social services employers and alumni, noting "each of these influential groups supplies, on occasion, feedback about how effective we are as social work educators" (p. 24). Nevertheless, much of the admission and gatekeeping research has presented the perspective of social work department heads, omitting other important stakeholders (Tam & Coleman, 2009). Faculty, field instructors, and social services employers each play different roles in admission and gatekeeping within social work programs. This section will overview what is known about stakeholders' perceptions of social work admission processes, presented primarily from a gatekeeping perspective which reflects the current body of literature.

Social Work Faculty

There is great power, privilege, and responsibility granted to faculty to teach, train, mentor, mold, evaluate, and supervise social work students (Sowbel, 2012). By definition, educators evaluate and judge student performance, which imposes a

gatekeeper role (Royse, 2000). At admission, educators “make judgments...in relation to [candidates’] potential for success” (Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p. 10). As noted earlier, there are different philosophical perspectives on admission and gatekeeping among social work faculty. As they oversee program admission, do faculty assume a screening-in or screening-out perspective? A screening-in attitude is developmental in nature, nurturing students through admission and their social work program (Madden, 2000). Screening-out involves denying admission to candidates who fail to demonstrate prerequisite knowledge, values, and skills as well as academic potential and professional suitability (Gibbs, 2000).

The greatest gatekeeping obligation is entrusted to social work faculty, whose role includes screening and assessment of applicants during program admission.

Interestingly, it is often faculty who seem most hesitant about performing gatekeeping duties (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013; Koerin & Miller, 1995). When screening candidates during admission, faculty may experience role conflict between the strengths perspective of a social work practitioner and the necessary evaluation required of an academician to assess students’ applications (Grady & Mr. S, 2009; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Miller & Koerin, 1998). At times, faculty’s gatekeeping views may be linked to interpretation of their role in social work education and who, if anyone, is their primary client. “Faculty struggle with these conflicts about where their loyalty lies, is it with clients, students, institutions, or the profession?” (Sowbel, 2012, p. 34). Further, “Can social work educators become more comfortable with self-identifying as educators with a gatekeeping function rather than identifying as educator-clinicians serving student-clients?” (Sowbel, 2012, p. 38). For faculty to successfully exercise gatekeeping roles, they should clearly

define their educator role and distinguish students from clients (Huff & Hodges, 2010; Sowbel, 2012; Tam & Kwok, 2007). Faculty may lose sight that applicants who pursue social work degrees are informed of admission and practice requirements and are expected to meet the outlined degree standards (Tam & Kwok, 2007).

Faculty members have also expressed concern with how admission processes are administered. “It is important to exercise caution in the development of [admission] criteria lest they contradict social work values which promote a non-judgmental acceptance of individual differences, a belief in the capacity for change, and respect for...self-determination” (Lafrance et al., 2004, pp. 337-338). Yet, Ryan et al. (1997) countered in support of stronger gatekeeping at admission, reasoning that faculty members often dedicate much time and energy in addressing students’ problems after admission. Indeed, as Royse (2000) concluded, “it takes courage...to refuse admission to marginal students” (p. 40), but “faculty must be willing to make hard decisions, acknowledging that their professional assessments are appropriate for screening students, thus safeguarding the social work profession” (Moore & Jenkins, 2000, p. 56). Additional study on faculty’s perceptions in regard to admission practices is needed.

Program Administrators

Faculty who serve as program administrators should assume leadership to help develop and implement department policies, overcome faculty reluctance or resistance, and lead through the complexities of admission selectivity and gatekeeping (Gibbs & Macy, 2000). Even when departments develop and implement selective admission criteria and processes, they may face enrollment demands from university administration due to economic pressures (Moore & Urwin, 1990; Younes, 1998). Administrators are

also concerned with legal risk, diverse student bodies, and fiscal outcomes (Gibbs & Macy, 2000). When administrators are not social workers or experienced with professional programs, in particular, they may favor clearly quantifiable admission criteria (such as GPA and test scores) rather than professional suitability, which may not present a full picture of a candidate's suitability for practice (Gibbs & Macy, 2000).

In a study of BSW program directors, respondents ranked factors that, in their estimation, ensure baccalaureate-level social workers are competent to practice (Gibbs, 1994a). The lowest-rated factor was ACT/SAT scores, with prior college performance rated next lowest. The three highest-rated factors were character-based, such as following social work ethics, respecting diversity, and espousing social work values. These findings are interesting, considering that only 52% of the directors whose programs use GPA admission criteria ranked overall college performance as extremely important for ensuring competent, entry-level BSW practice. In comparison, values-related factors were rated most important (Gibbs, 1994a). GPA may serve as a convenient factor for determining cut-off levels for programs with limited enrollments (Gibbs, 1994a). Perhaps, then, academic performance serves as a floor for social work admission, and then training for ethics and behaviors becomes the focus after students' admission.

Field Instructors

Field instructors are "partners in the social work education process" (Miller & Koerin, 2001, p. 1), becoming "an extension of the academic faculty and carry[ing] comparable gatekeeping functions" (Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p. 16). Field instructors are experienced, practicing social workers who supervise, or proctor, social work interns

during their practicum experiences in agency-based settings. When faculty fail to exercise gatekeeping authority during admission and coursework or when problems do not emerge until students encounter the real demands of social work practice, the responsibility falls upon field instructors (Tam, 2003).

Field instructors have reported that professional suitability is important to social work practice (Lafrance et al., 2004, p. 328). Moreover, field instructors highly valued students' personal qualities and fit with the social work profession, yet personal qualities are generally weighted least during admission reviews (Lafrance et al., 2004). Additionally, field instructors have identified self-awareness, capacity for building social work relationships with others, and personal congruence with social work values as necessary for students. Lafrance et al. (2004) concluded that student backgrounds and experiences "cannot be ignored as an important factor in the selection and preparation of candidates for the social work profession" (p. 332). For social work programs and faculty, the question remains how to integrate personal suitability into admission selectivity and "find better ways to deal with the early determination of suitability within the parameters of university regulations and provisions for appeals" (Lafrance et al., 2004, p. 338).

Social Services Employers and Practitioners

Employers in the social services sector "rely on social work educators to ensure that graduates enter the field with a level of competence required for professional service delivery" (Ryan et al., 1997, p. 5). Furthermore, social work's signature pedagogy of field education requires strong partnerships with social services agencies to host student interns. With social services employers and practitioners intricately and inextricably

woven into what is often the final stage of social work education, their perspectives are noticeably missing from the first step of the educational process, that of admission.

There is limited documentation of representation among employers/practitioners in the admission process for social work programs in the United States. In an international study, Shardlow, Scholar, Munro, and McLaughlin (2011) examined the “extent and nature of [social services] employer involvement in...selection and admissions procedures” (p. 207) for social work programs. Internationally, employer involvement is stipulated for some social work programs, which differs from accreditation standards in the United States. Overall, there was little influence by employers on program admission in relation to student recruitment, admission criteria, or admission procedures. The authors presented an interesting question about the desirability of employer participation in admission, pondering if employers are more concerned about candidates’ abilities to perform particular job duties than faculty’s expectation for well-rounded social work practice readiness (Shardlow et al., 2011). In another study, based in the United Kingdom, Watson (2002) evaluated a program’s newly implemented admission process consisting of paper applications only, no candidate interviews, in which each application was reviewed by a team of two raters, one a faculty member and the other a representative from a social services agency. The admission committees achieved 85% agreement on candidate ratings, a high rate of consistency between academics and practitioners on their assessments of favorable or poor candidates to the social work program.

As an exemplar, Hagar (2000) described a program in which a panel comprised of only social work practitioners conducted interviews with BSW applicants. The

practitioners catalogued a list of essential qualities and aptitudes for social work practice and developed a 15-minute interview protocol to elicit information from candidates in the domains of verbal and written articulation, problem solving, conflict resolution, systemic thinking, commitment to social work, life experience factors that influence career choice, and personal qualities of self-confidence, poise, maturity, compassion, nonjudgmental attitude, humor, creativity, independence, and honesty. When asked about their motivations for participating in the interview process, the practitioners reported, in order, the opportunity to interact with other social work professionals, a commitment to the profession and social work education, and respect for the social work program in question. All practitioner participants were positive about their experiences and the collaborative role in program admission (Hagar, 2000). What is unknown, however, is how practitioners' evaluation of candidates compared to faculty's in predicting student success. Regardless, practitioners can "represent the current demands of practice more authentically than can faculty who are presently not engaged in practice" (Hagar, 2000, p. 285). Practitioner experiences of the interview process can provide useful feedback for faculty on the need to revise admission criteria or curriculum content and strengthen programs' connections with the practice community. Additionally, practitioners' feedback on student performance at the interviews can be used in future academic advising as admitted students proceed in the social work major.

Social Work Applicants

Admission to a social work program is the first step toward "students' personal aspirations, career opportunities, [and] state licensure for practice" (Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p. 8). Selective admission serves to "increase students' identification with and

commitment to the profession because individual capability and potential...are formally recognized and rewarded through sanctioned entry...Students are proud of this initial accomplishment, and their investment in quality control seems to crystallize as a result” (Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p. 8). When admitted students observe classmates to be unsuitable or unqualified for the profession, however, it is not unusual for students to express their concerns (Gibbs & Macy, 2000). As applicants and peers (as well as future social work colleagues), students demonstrate a stake in program admission and gatekeeping functions (Gibbs & Macy, 2000). Notwithstanding, there are few studies focused on program admission from the perspective of social work students/applicants or from the students after their studies are completed in an alumni role.

In a survey of successful applicants to social work programs in Northern Ireland, Campbell et al. (2013) found 60% of respondents were highly satisfied with the use of personal statements in the admission process. Qualitative comments described writing essays as helping candidates to reflect on why they wanted to be social workers and to prepare for in-person interviews. Some respondents expressed concerns about the ease of candidates to potentially plagiarize their essays, though. Over 80% of the respondents expressed they were satisfied or mostly satisfied with the process of personal interviews. However, a few respondents indicated the nature of interview questions would be expected after graduation when seeking professional jobs, not at the onset before their social work education commenced. An acknowledged bias in the sample was its limitation to only successfully admitted students; unsuccessful students may offer differing perspectives of the admission process (Campbell et al., 2013).

Hagar (2000) also solicited feedback from the students who participated in panel interviews with social work practitioners in the admission process for their BSW program. While the students described the experience as anxiety-producing, they appreciated the opportunity to meet and talk with current practitioners in the field. Student feedback indicated they interpreted practitioners' participation in the admission process as bringing an unbiased and neutral perspective. Students also valued the preparation that practitioner interviews provided for future practicum and employment interviews (Hagar, 2000). Watson (2002) queried successful social work candidates about their paper-only application process versus an interview process. Students indicated they felt they could accurately and adequately represent their accomplishments and abilities in a manner considered "fairer" than interviews, where a candidate may "perform well on the day" (Watson, 2002, p. 85).

Clients

Clients are the "indirect beneficiaries of academic gatekeeping standards...ultimately impacted by whether or not educational programs are able to screen out...students whose suitability for a career in social work is compromised for any reason" (Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p. 13). While there is considerable attention to the ethical obligations for protecting social work clients in gatekeeping and admission literature (Born & Carroll, 1988; Coyle et al., 2011; Currer & Atherton, 2008; Dillon, 2007; Gibbs & Macy, 2000; Regehr et al., 2001; Royse, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997; Tam, 2003), there is very little research on client perspectives about social work admission. Internationally, there is greater evidence of client participation in social work program admission; participation of service users and caregivers is mandated in England (Manthorpe et al.,

2010; Matka et al., 2010). In a 2004-2005 survey, 75% of social work schools had service users and caregivers represented in their admission process (Manthorpe et al., 2010). Of these programs, 20% asked service users and caregivers to help draft interview questions or rank applications (Manthorpe et al., 2010). However, the study did not present feedback from service users or caregivers about their experiences with social work program admission.

In another admission study based in the United Kingdom, which also included a clinical psychology program, researchers queried panel members for admission interviews about their experiences (Matka et al., 2010). They found, overwhelmingly, that service users/caregivers as well as the candidates felt that client representation during the interviews was important. Client participants described personal benefits as well, such as building confidence, gaining knowledge or insight, being heard, and feeling valued. One respondent noted that clients offered “insight into how...people who work in the caring professions carry out their duties. This insight is utilized in these interviews to select workers and students who can relate to service users appropriately” (Matka et al., 2010, p. 2146). Another theme about values emerged: Clients have a right to involvement in the treatment/helping process; client involvement can begin with socializing helpers-in-training to value client input. Interestingly, nearly 80% of the faculty respondents reported that panels experienced disagreements about suitable candidates during the interviews. Over 40% of the responding faculty noted differing perspectives on what traits/skills should be expected at admission versus developed during social work studies (Matka et al., 2010). A more precise nature of their disagreements was not reported, so it is unknown how groups represented on the panel

(service user/caregiver, faculty, or practitioner) may have viewed professional suitability differently. Additional study is needed to understand how client representation in the admission process impacts selection outcomes. The meaning of client representation during program admission may be more symbolic in nature for empowering clients and socializing future professionals (Matka et al., 2010).

Ethical Responsibilities in Program Admission

Credibility and integrity of the social work profession depend upon educational programs' maintaining high practice standards among applicants, students, and graduates (Born & Carroll, 1988; Ryan et al., 1997; Tam, 2003; Tam & Kwok, 2007). As "first line gatekeepers to the profession" (Barlow & Coleman, 2003, p. 151), faculty have the responsibility of matriculating graduates who are academically, behaviorally, and ethically prepared for entry into social work practice (Cole & Lewis, 1993). In response to changing trends in application/admission ratios and apparent decreases in admission standards among social work programs, Born and Carroll (1988) raised ethical concerns about faculty members' obligations to clients and the profession. Social work educators have ethical obligations to multiple constituencies when administering program admission (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). Within the social work literature, discussion centers specifically on faculty's professional and ethical responsibilities to (a) clients, (b) students, and (c) the profession (Koerin & Miller, 1995). This section will review faculty's ethical obligations during program admission, framing the discussion within guidelines of the *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (2008).

Ethical Responsibilities to Clients

“Social work education...promises that social work students who pass through the exit gate not only are knowledgeable and skillful but also will possess the requisite professional qualities critical to protecting the consumer public” (Gibbs, 1994a, p. 26). The *Code of Ethics* clearly outlined that “social workers’ primary responsibility is to promote the well-being of clients” (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008, p. 7). In this instance, the concept of *client* pertains not only to individuals, families, and groups seeking social work services, but also society and the public at large (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). There is strong support that social work educators have professional obligations to uphold client protections as well as public trust in the profession (Born & Carroll, 1988; Coyle et al., 2011; Curren & Atherton, 2008; Dillon, 2007; Regehr et al., 2001; Ryan et al., 1997; Tam, 2003). Thus, a critical—if not primary—function of selective admission and gatekeeping is protecting the public, both current and future clients, from incompetent social work practitioners (Gibbs & Macy, 2000). Indeed, as Royse (2000) reasoned, “The best argument *for* gatekeeping and maintaining firm, uncompromising standards is that without them it is difficult to protect the vulnerable sections of society from dishonest, impaired, and incompetent students who would like to call themselves social workers” (p. 25).

Ethical Responsibilities to Students

Faculty’s views on gatekeeping are shaped by concern for potential harm to future clients when candidates are not prepared for social work practice (Ryan et al., 1997). Yet, gatekeeping and admission efforts become multifaceted when faculty’s other obligations, particularly to their students, are considered. From an educational policy

perspective, students' rights are safeguarded through protective measures such as notification of the program's standards for admission, continuation, and matriculation; clear decision-making procedures of the program; and due process to include notice, hearings, and an appeals process (Cole, 1991; Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013; Koerin & Miller, 1995). From a student development perspective on admission and gatekeeping, potential role conflicts become apparent for social work faculty.

Madden (2000) supported a screening-in philosophy for social work admission, suggesting that faculty can support student self-determination in pursuing a social work career by offering equal opportunity to admission without structural barriers. Similarly, Holmström and Taylor (2008a) argued that an overemphasis on admission gatekeeping disregards faculty's role in ongoing assessment and support as students progress through the social work curriculum. As developers, faculty consider students as learners without being harsher critics than practitioners would be held to on the job (Curren & Atherton, 2008; Koerin & Miller, 1995). If students struggle during their studies, then faculty provide remediation plans and supports for student deficiencies (Madden, 2000).

Students, too, have responsibilities during the educational process "to demonstrate suitability at the selection stage, and to uphold the academic and professional standards of social work thereafter" (Dillon, 2007, p. 839). Faculty, through instruction and modeling, demonstrate ethical behaviors to help students build their professional suitability and moral character (Holmström, 2014). In addition, faculty have an ethical obligation to help candidates "identify their compatibility with the demands of the profession" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 22). If students are deemed harmful to self or others during this process, then gatekeeping measures are required, as "faculty have a clear duty to deny

admission” (Madden, 2000, p. 143). If admitted students later fail, then faculty have supported students’ rights of informed choice in order to attempt social work studies (Madden, 2000).

During the gatekeeping process, faculty and field instructors may experience “internal conflict when, as educators with social work values, judgments must be made about the professional suitability of other individuals” (Regehr et al., 2001, p. 128). Core social work values include respecting dignity and worth of all human beings (NASW, 2008), finding strengths in people, and acknowledging the capacity for growth and change in others (Regehr et al., 2001). Upholding these values, faculty are able to recognize and respect students’ developmental needs during the educational process (Holmström & Taylor, 2008a), particularly at the undergraduate level of social work education. Nevertheless, a developmental approach to social work education should be weighed against responsibility to protect future clients from those candidates whose difficulties can and do result in client harm (Regehr et al., 2001). Ultimately, social work educators are responsible for evaluating and ensuring that students have the necessary knowledge, values, and skills for professional practice (Royse, 2000).

Born and Carroll (1988) posed pivotal questions, still pertinent today, for framing ethical discussions about gatekeeping: Who are the clients of social work faculty? Are they program applicants, enrolled students, or alumni’s future clients? Faculty who are reticent of the gatekeeper role may do so because they view students as clients versus “consumers of an educational product” (Born & Carroll, 1988, p. 81). It is imperative that social work faculty distinguish program applicants and students from clients. As Cole (1991) reasoned, “The social work student should not be regarded as being in

treatment as opposed to being professionally trained” (Contract Theory section, para. 5). “When schools are not clear about this distinction, they may compromise their ability to produce graduates able to adequately serve the real clients” (Born & Carroll, 1988, p. 81). “If social work programs accept students with severe personal problems, who lack aptitude for the work, or who would otherwise be ‘unsuitable’ for professional practice there is an inherent failure in their professional and ethical responsibility to society” (Cole, 1991, Contract Theory section, para. 5). To help faculty delineate their role as educator from that of clinician, in order to fulfill their gatekeeping obligations, students must not be considered or treated as clients.

Ethical Responsibilities to the Social Work Profession

The *Code of Ethics* outlined social workers’ ethical responsibilities to the profession with “social workers should work toward the maintenance and promotion of high standards of practice” (NASW, 2008, p. 24). Further, “social workers should protect, enhance, and improve the integrity of the profession” (NASW, 2008, p. 24). For social work educators, this implies a charge to “exercise quality control over admission and graduation of practitioners from the profession’s training programs” (Born & Carroll, 1988, p. 81). Over the past 20-30 years, there has been concern within the profession about the appearance of decline in the quality of social work education and the effects on client services and professional image (Cole, 1991; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Karger, 2012). Cowburn and Nelson (2008) framed admission decision making as an inherently ethical activity for social work educators, with three areas of trust impacting the field: (a) public trust in the social work profession, (b) trust in social work agencies, and (c) trust as a building block of social worker-client relationships. When programs

matriculate graduates who are not prepared for social work practice, public trust in the profession, the work of social service agencies, and in the efficacy of helping relationships is damaged. Through admission and gatekeeping practices, social work educators “protect the public from the practice of unethical or incompetent social work” (Born & Carroll, 1998, p. 82).

Social work programs “do not exist merely to provide a graduate degree to all who express a wish to have one” (Born & Carroll, 1988, p. 81). Admission decisions should not be made lightly, for few students are dismissed or withdraw from social work programs (Born & Carroll, 1988; Gibbs, 1994b; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Sowbel, 2011). In essence, program admission may be “a tacit decision to award the degree” (Born & Carroll, 1988, p. 80). More importantly, conferring a social work degree is a sanction to practice (Gibbs & Macy, 2000). Therefore, social work programs must ensure that graduates have the knowledge, skills, values, and professional traits necessary for entry-level practice (Gibbs, 1994b). Certainly, faculty can recognize growth and the developmental needs of students (Gibbs & Macy, 2000), understanding “that students often must grow into the professional role making mistakes along the way” (Moore et al., 1998, p. 40). Faculty members face weighing student needs against their ethical responsibilities to clients, the public, and the profession.

Issues of Social Justice Impacting Social Work Admission

Social work educators have raised concerns about social justice and fairness during program admission procedures (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Coyle et al., 2011; Buck & Tennille, 2014). Social justice is one of the core values of the social work profession. According to the *Code of Ethics*, “Social workers pursue social change,

particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” (NASW, 2008, p. 5). Further, “social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people” (NASW, 2008, p. 5). While the call to promote social justice is more clearly manifest in traditional social work practice, defending social injustice is also necessary within the educational practice domain of social work faculty. Thus, social work educators have an ethical mandate to establish effective and fair entrance procedures with admission criteria that predict success while respecting ideals of diversity and social justice. Within the scope of program admission, social work faculty grapple with issues of social justice related to selectivity bias (Cowburn & Nelson, 2008; Gibbs, 2000; Gibbs & Macy, 2000; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Moore & Urwin, 1990; Tam & Kwok, 2007), recruiting and retaining diverse students (Bracy, 2000; Coyle et al., 2011; Dillon, 2007; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Younes, 1998), academic preparedness among applicants (Bracy, 2000; Dumbrigue, Najor-Durack, & Moxley, 2001; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Holmström, 2014; Madden, 2000; Tam & Kwok, 2007), and academic supports for student retention (Bracy, 2000; Watson & Rycraft, 2010).

Selectivity Bias in Social Work Admission

Programs “strive to ensure that the admissions decisions they make are fair and commensurate with social work values” (Dillon, 2007, p. 836). A social justice debate exists around social work admission, centering on “the tensions between a widening access perspective [to social work education and the field] and a focus on academic ability” (Holmström, 2014, p. 451). “In a discipline that advocates for working with the

disabled, disempowered, and disenfranchised, how do social workers exclude others from the profession?" (Grady & Mr. S, 2009, p. 62).

Foundational to an exploration of social justice issues within social work education is a recognition of privilege and bias implicit to educational settings (Gibbs, 2000). Some students' academic deficiencies and preparedness may be connected to educational and social systems that oppress marginalized groups, with lower testing scores reflecting bias towards majority applicants (Hepler & Noble, 1990; Tam & Kwok, 2007). Campbell et al. (2013) suggested there is selectivity bias for middle-class applicants in social work programs, with recognition that some academic criteria such as GPA and standardized tests may disadvantage nontraditional students, minority groups, and students with low socioeconomic status (Gibbs, 2000). For example, Holmström and Taylor (2008b) extolled social work educators to be mindful of socioeconomic factors that influence traditional measures of academic attainment. Gibbs (2000) contended that social work programs can achieve more inclusive admission procedures by balancing traditional scholastic criteria with other traits and measures of professional suitability. To enact fairer admission practices, faculty should examine their personal biases, prejudices, expectations, and assumptions about candidates (Moore & Urwin, 1990) and help overcome institutional barriers (Gibbs & Macy, 2000) and issues of racism, sexism, and cultural differences that can impact selectivity bias.

It is necessary to distinguish that admission gatekeeping's function is to maintain professional standards of excellence, not to exclude marginalized groups from educational opportunities or the social work profession (Moore & Urwin, 1990). With a selective admission approach, social work programs will deny applicants. As Royse

(2000) observed, “In deciding whom to admit into our programs, we also decide who ought to be excluded” (p. 24). Fundamentally, however, the “denial of access to the social work profession seems to present a dilemma to an empowering profession” (Younes, 1998, p. 145). Social work values of social justice, equity, and diversity support admitting students of diverse backgrounds and experiences, celebrating the learning benefits that diversity in the student body offers (Coyle et al., 2011).

Alternatively, exclusionary practices run counter to social work values of respect, dignity and value of every person, nonjudgmentalism, and maximizing self-determination (Royse, 2000). When social work programs deny applicants, they should ascertain if denials are applied equally.

Madden (2000) maintained, “Strategies that seek to exclude students who may be unprepared, disadvantaged, or otherwise seen as at-risk threatens to violate students’ rights and keep potentially good practitioners out of the field” (p. 146). Because of inequities in academic preparedness, Bracy (2000) argued that using “academic criteria of a professional nature” (p. 89) within a talent development framework would result in more inclusive admission and, therefore, a more diverse student body and workforce in social work. Yet, programs face the “complicated business of promoting student diversity without compromising professional and academic standards” (Dillon, 2007, p. 839). Of course, programs should be mindful not to presume that diverse applicants are not academically prepared (Bracy, 2000).

Academic Supports Prior to Social Work Admission

Cowburn and Nelson (2008) explored how social work educators can incorporate social justice practices during admission procedures. Social work programs can expand

opportunities for admission through recruiting strategies (Bracy, 2000) and providing academic supports to candidates throughout the application process (Dumbrigue et al., 2001). Bracy (2000) offered recruitment strategies that promote ideals of inclusion and social justice to enhance diversity among social work candidates by focusing on access and reframing the concept of educational excellence. For example, social work programs can enact specific recruitment strategies to increase diverse applicant pools by developing working relationships with community colleges and community organizations. Further, programs may capitalize on alumni networks and contacts with large social service providers to reach entry-level or paraprofessional employees seeking to gain increased training and credentials or promotions. Additionally, programs may develop scholarships for diverse students, specialized admission counseling, and advising to help recruit and retain more diverse applicants (Bracy, 2000).

A review of the literature demonstrates that traditional academic measures of student potential, such as GPA and test scores, have predictive value for success in social work programs. Nevertheless, many social work educators who espouse a social justice approach recognize that candidates who are academically vulnerable may offer other characteristics highly desirable among social work practitioners (Dumbrigue et al., 2001; Munro, 1995). Admission support programs help candidates remediate in order to compete successfully in MSW program applicant pools. Admission support programs avow ideals of affirmative action (Tam & Kwok, 2007) and tenets of andragogy, adult learning theory that holds adult learners present with different motivations for learning such as career advancement, skills needed for job requirements, or self-improvement

(Dumbrigue et al., 2001; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Moxley, Najor-Durack, & Dumbrigue, 2000).

Specifically, admission support programs help develop candidates with weak academic backgrounds, but who demonstrate strong professional potential such as motivation, vocational experience (Dumbrigue et al., 2001), and commitment to social justice in their life's work (Buck & Tennille, 2014). In graduate education, particularly, significant time may have passed since candidates earned their UGPA, which reflected their abilities during a different life stage (Dumbrigue et al., 2001). Some educators argue that candidates with long-term employment histories prove stability and fit for the profession (Dumbrigue et al., 2001), despite some evidence that has indicated prior work experience and age are not related positively to school performance (Munro, 1995; Pelech et al., 1999). For applicants with weak academic records, one approach is to build supports to help otherwise good candidates achieve the necessary academic skills to be successful in social work programs.

Buck and Tennille (2014) described a social work program purposefully designed to endorse social justice programming with an access mission, administering a holistic admission process that looks beyond GPA and considers life and work experience along with personal adversity. Applicants, whose application fees are waived, are encouraged to write about circumstances related to a low UGPA in their personal statements for conditional admission (Buck & Tennille, 2014). In the Dumbrigue et al. (2001) study, most program applicants had experienced significant barriers to success during their undergraduate studies, such as financial insecurity or family issues. Of the applicants who participated in admission support services, 58% were ultimately admitted to the

school's MSW program, earning GPAs ranging from 3.6 to 4.0, with termination and withdrawal rates slightly less than the school's overall rate (Dumbrigue et al., 2001).

In comparison, an enhancement seminar model offers MSW candidates who do not meet admission requirements acceptance to the social work program via a "probationary admission/enhancement initiative" (Watson & Rycraft, 2010, p. 124). During their first fall semester, students are admitted on a probationary status and required to attend a weekly, two-hour enhancement seminar on topics such as expectations in graduate school, academic advising, public speaking, library skills, graduate-level writing, and stress management. Watson and Rycraft (2010) found that students admitted to the enhancement initiative were significantly more diverse than regularly admitted students. Also, there was no significant difference in the GPAs or graduation and retention rates between students with regular or probationary admission. Compared to regularly admitted students, probationary students were just as likely to graduate or not graduate and improved their GPAs significantly more. The authors concluded that students with weaker academic records can perform in graduate programs with creativity, support, and opportunity (Watson & Rycraft, 2010).

A difference with baccalaureate social work education is the opportunity to have contact with students in pre-professional courses, before they are formally admitted to the major (Gibbs, 1994b; Kropf, 2000; Reynolds, 2004). As such, faculty members are able to advise students and provide constructive feedback about their classroom performance and professional suitability to the field. Reynolds (2004) developed a feedback instrument to help pre-admitted BSW students assess their compatibility with the social work profession based on faculty's assessments. Scores on the instrument improved

significantly as students progressed through five pre-professional courses, and instrument scores correlated to ratings on admission applications later in the program. Students used faculty's feedback and made improvements in their skills, ultimately benefitting students, the program, and profession (Reynolds, 2004). Although research in the area of academic supports prior to social work admission is somewhat limited, pre-admission efforts to help students increase their academic preparedness show promise of success.

Academic Supports for Student Retention

Rather than focusing program resources on exclusionary gatekeeping, some educators have suggested that social work programs should offer students “bridges to success” (Barlow & Coleman, 2003, p. 154) to develop potential and provide supports that are developmentally “aligned with social work values of inclusion, diversity and belief in capacity for change” (Holmström & Taylor, 2008b, p. 835). To achieve success (defined as degree completion), retention policies and supports can be developed concurrently with recruitment efforts. If social work programs are admitting academically underprepared students, then departments should provide supportive and remedial services rather than issue failing grades (Madden, 2000; Pelech et al., 1999).

Bracy (2000) promoted an inclusionary “talent development approach” (p. 86) in which universities define excellence not in the levels of student achievement at admission, but rather upon exit. The educator's philosophy shifts from evaluating student abilities at admission to student outcomes and the program's teaching and learning processes. Accordingly, programs dedicate resources to achieving scholastic standards among enrolled students, measuring students who reach minimum competence by time of

graduation, an approach that requires supports for students throughout their social work education (Bracy, 2000).

Student support and retention efforts can be directed through academic services, curriculum, and pedagogy. Academic services may include tutoring for coursework (Coyle et al., 2011; Tam & Kwok, 2007), mentoring from other students or community practitioners (Coyle et al., 2011; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Tam & Kwok, 2007), and career counseling with faculty (Hepler & Noble, 1990). Departments can launch campaigns to endow scholarships and develop partnerships with community agencies for stipends and paid internships to help support students during practicum (Hepler & Noble, 1990). In addition, schools may purposefully place vulnerable students with highly skilled field instructors during practicum experiences (Regehr et al., 2001). Furthermore, departments can implement curriculum changes and tenets of andragogy to meet diverse students' needs (Coyle et al., 2011; Dumbrigue et al., 2001) by applying multiculturally responsive teaching (Bracy, 2000). For diverse students, a warm and inviting admission process and educational experience may reduce anxiety and fear and foster feelings of belongingness in the higher education setting (Bracy, 2000). Faculty can promote student-centered approaches to teaching and learning by recognizing and respecting diverse ways of learning, facilitating active and cooperative learning among students, pacing tasks and assignments, and maintaining contact with students both in and out of the classroom (Bracy, 2000).

Social Work Admission with a Social Justice Mission

Proponents of remedial admission programs argue the educational and social justice values of such programs, particularly in urban institutional settings. Detractors

would question the cost-effectiveness of admission remedial efforts in an era of decreased funding in higher education. It is noteworthy that the publications about support programs date to the early 2000s, with the articles likely submitted for publication before the 2008 recession and quite possibly reflecting a different era of funding and resources in higher education (Zumeta, 2010). Moreover, concerns about grade inflation (Hepler & Noble, 1990; Miller, 2014) and low failure, dismissal, and withdrawal rates among social work students (Sowbel, 2011) do not appear unreasonable. In developing admission criteria and practices, social work faculty and administrators should consider if supportive admission services raise students' academic preparedness to compete equitably in social work programs or, alternatively, if grade inflation is skewing objective evaluation of all students' performance in social work programs as measured by GPA. Are social work's academic standards being compromised or is a social justice mission a fitting agenda in social work education?

In a seminal report on social work education, Hollis and Taylor (1951) asserted, "Where it is commonly supposed that anyone can do social work, anyone is likely to do it" (p. 270). Indeed, "can the profession be all things to everyone and does everyone deserve a social work degree, regardless of their background, needs, experiences, and social skills?" (Grady & Mr. S., 2009, p. 62). When social work educators are able to reconcile these questions, they can develop fair admission and gatekeeping policies that reflect values and principles of the profession (Grady & Mr. S, 2009). Social work faculty may very well respond affirmatively that program admission practices are one means to a social justice mission.

Summary

“Social work educators have stressed that the life of the profession is tied to whom we select to enter our profession and provide services to clients. This is an awesome responsibility” (Reynolds, 2004, p. 29). Accordingly, admission serves an important function in social work education, for once admitted, few students terminate programs (Born & Carroll, 1988; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Sowbel, 2011). There are varied philosophical perspectives of admission gatekeeping in social work education. A screening-in approach applies a developmental focus on students’ skill building, while a screening-out mindset applies admission standards more deliberately as a preventative gatekeeping function (Gibbs, 2000; Madden, 2000). Faculty’s philosophical orientation toward gatekeeping certainly influences a department’s admission policies. Indeed, social work educators are often reluctant to engage in gatekeeping functions due to lack of formal policies (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Gibbs, 1994b; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam & Kwok, 2007; Urwin et al., 2006; Younes, 1998), uneven administrative support at the university level (Miller & Koerin; Ryan et al., 1997), and fears of litigation (Gibbs, 1994a). Clearly, admission and gatekeeping practices are important issues that require further development for many social work programs.

Establishing admission criteria, determining academic and professional suitability criteria specifically, often challenges social work educators. Academic criteria are typically straightforward as scholastic measures of GPA, exam scores, and credit hours. The concept of professional suitability is far more complex, as faculty grapple with identifying what personal traits and values constitute personal suitability for the field of social work *prior* to program admission (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Elpers & Fitzgerald,

2013; Gibbs & Macy, 2000; Holmström, 2014; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Lafrance et al., 2004; Miller & Koerin, 2001; Tam & Coleman, 2009; Thomas et al., 2004). Faculty members are confronted with systematically gathering data that accurately reflect professional suitability through admission mechanisms with demonstrated predictive value.

Social work applications commonly include GPA, exam scores, personal statements, candidate interviews, reference letters, and evidence of prior human services work or volunteer experience. There is mixed research support for the predictive values of these admission mechanisms. Overall, preadmission GPA has the strongest research support for predicting candidates' academic performance in a social work program, though with moderate effect size (Dunlap et al., 1998; Fortune, 2003; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Pelech et al., 1999; Schmidt, 2007; Thomas et al., 2004; Watson & Rycraft, 2010). Entrance exam scores, such as the GRE, have also been correlated to candidates' performance in GPA and comprehensive exam scores (Dunlap et al., 1998; Thomas et al., 2004).

Research on faculty's ratings of personal statements does not offer strong support for predictive value (Fortune, 2003; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Pelech et al., 1999). However, it appears that faculty ratings of candidates' total applications, including personal statements in conjunction with other application components, demonstrate predictive merit (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Pelech et al., 1999). Despite their widespread use, candidate interviews do not significantly or consistently predict student performance, with problems of interviewer bias, lack of standardized rating scales, and subjective assessments by reviewers (Bridge, 1996; Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Munro,

1995; Watson, 2002). The function of interviews may very well be found in screening-out candidates before they enter a social work program (Bridge, 1996). The utility of reference letters is greatly limited by the rarity in which references criticize applicants (Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Munro, 1995; Watson, 2002). Further, multiple studies have found no support for reference ratings predicting candidates' performance (Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Munro, 1995; Pelech et al., 1999). Finally, multiple studies have found no significant correlation between candidates' prior work experience and successful outcomes in their social work education (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Holmström & Taylor, 2008b; Pelech et al., 1999).

As a professional program, social work comprises an educational system including faculty, program administrators, field instructors, social services employers, students, and clients, each of whom with different perspectives of social work practice and the functions of social work education (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013; Gibbs & Macy, 2000; Grady & Mr. S, 2009; Hagar, 2000; Lafrance et al., 2004; Manthorpe et al., 2010; Matka et al., 2010; Miller & Koerin, 1998; Royse, 2000; Shardlow et al., 2011; Sowbel, 2012; Tam & Coleman, 2009; Urwin et al. 2006). Within the system of social work education, faculty members have multiple ethical responsibilities to balance, with obligations to students, current and future clients, and the social work profession (Born & Carroll, 1988; Coyle et al., 2011; Curren & Atherton, 2008; Dillon, 2007; Gibbs & Macy, 2000; Regehr et al., 2001; Royse, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997; Tam, 2003). Included in faculty's ethical obligations is a commitment to social justice. Applied to admission practices, issues of social justice include selectivity bias, recruitment and retention of diverse students, academic preparedness among applicants, and fair and effective

entrance procedures (Bracy, 2000; Dumbrigue et al., 2001; Buck & Tennille, 2014; Watson & Rycraft, 2010). By applying stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), there is much to discover about the process of social work admission, its gatekeeping function, stakeholder perspectives, and ethical implications.

SECTION FOUR:
CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

Executive Summary

A Stakeholder Analysis of Social Work Admission at Faith-Based University

Lisa A. Street
Fall 2016

Executive Summary

A Stakeholder Analysis of Social Work Admission at Faith-Based University

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to conduct a stakeholder analysis of social work program admission at Faith-Based University (FBU). The project assessed what stakeholder groups want/expect from social work admission and evaluated how multiple interests were represented in the admission process.

Method

Qualitative stakeholder analysis conducted in focus groups and individual interviews with 53 participants representing seven stakeholder groups in spring-summer 2016. Attempts to recruit participants from FBU administration were unsuccessful.

Findings

Primary Stakeholder Groups

- Fulltime faculty
- Alumni
- Social service employers
- Social work clients
- Students currently admitted
- Field instructors
- Adjunct faculty
- University administration

Stakeholder Expectations for Admission

Analysis revealed four themes for stakeholders' expectations of social work admission:



FIGURE 1: STAKEHOLDER EXPECTATIONS FOR BSW ADMISSION

Stakeholder Representation in Admission

- External stakeholders were underrepresented in the admission process.
- Participants strongly supported the addition of external stakeholders to social work admission, namely current social work practitioners, student representatives, and adjunct faculty members.
- Noted benefits of stakeholder representation in admission: current perspectives from the profession and workplace, greater objectivity, diversity, student coaching and mentoring.

Stakeholder Perceptions of the FBU Social Work Program

The FBU social work department has earned a reputation as a high-quality BSW program in four domains:

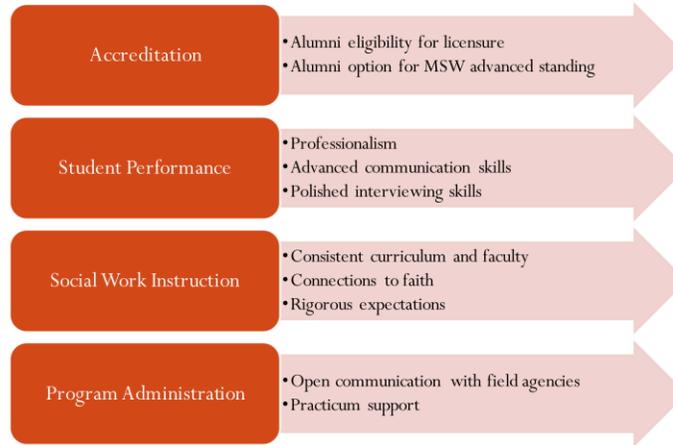


FIGURE 2: STRENGTHS IN THE FBU SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM AS IDENTIFIED BY EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

Linkages to Implicit Curriculum

- Frame admission as an extension of the educational process, a component of implicit curriculum.
- Attend to admission as a professional socialization process for students.
- Seek stakeholder feedback on admission criteria and curricular content.

Recommendations

Based on the stakeholder analysis, the following recommendations are suggested for the BSW program:

- **Be more purposeful in promoting professional socialization during the admission process.**
Celebrate the admission process. Distinguish and acknowledge the achievement of admission with students. Advertise the social work major on campus.
- **Incorporate personal interviews in the admission process.**
Facilitate students' professional socialization through personal interviews. Prepare students for future practicum and employment interviews. Connect relationally with students through personal interviews.
- **Expand participation of external stakeholder groups in social work admission.**
Seek adjunct faculty's input regarding students' performance and professional suitability. Invite community social workers to participate in admission interviews. Include senior-level student representatives in admission interviews and/or mentoring with applicants.
- **Expose students to multiple social work practice experiences pre-practicum.**
Consider formalizing a mini-practicum experience prior to senior year. Invite panels of professional social workers to speak and present on campus.

A Stakeholder Analysis of Social Work Admission at Faith-Based University

The purpose of this study is to conduct a stakeholder analysis of social work program admission at Faith-Based University (FBU). Freeman (1984) defined a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (p. 46). For this study, the stakeholder concept is applied to the undergraduate social work program and the groups who comprise its system of social work education. The project will assess what the various groups want/expect from social work admission and evaluate how multiple interests are represented in the admission process. Next, stakeholder perceptions of the social work program will be presented, specifically the indicators that contribute to the program’s reputation in the social work community. To conclude is a discussion of what can be learned from stakeholders to inform admission practices at FBU and how findings are linked to implicit curriculum of the *2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate and Master’s Social Work Programs* (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015). This report presents the guiding evaluation questions, the study’s methods, findings, and recommendations.

Evaluation Questions

To inform social work admission practices, the evaluation questions of this stakeholder analysis are:

1. Who are the stakeholder groups for social work admission?
2. What do stakeholder groups want/expect from social work admission?
3. How are stakeholder interests represented in social work admission?
4. What are stakeholder perceptions of the social work program at FBU?

Methods

Design and Sample

Study participants were identified at two levels: stakeholder groups and specific individuals who represent those groups. First, the researcher conducted a stakeholder mapping activity with FBU faculty/program administrators to brainstorm groups with interests in social work admission resulting in the identification of eight primary stakeholder groups: fulltime faculty, currently enrolled students, alumni, field instructors, social service employers, adjunct faculty, university administrators, and clients. To identify participants representing the various stakeholder groups, the researcher used purposeful sampling techniques and established criteria for selecting individuals to represent each stakeholder group.

With institutional review board approval, the researcher conducted focus groups and individual interviews with 53 participants representing seven stakeholder groups: fulltime faculty, students currently admitted and enrolled in the BSW program, alumni of the program, field instructors, social service employers, adjunct faculty, and social work clients (defined as social workers who have also been service receivers). The researcher sought representation from the stakeholder group of university administration, but attempts to recruit participants were unsuccessful. See Table 1 for a summary of interviews.

Table 1

Summary of Interviews and Focus Groups

Stakeholder Group	Total Number in Group	Type of Interview	Participants per Interview
Fulltime faculty	2	Group interviews #1 & #2	2
Adjunct faculty	3	Individual interviews	3
Students	17	Focus group #1 (seniors)	6
		Focus group #2 (juniors)	9
		Individual interviews	2
Alumni	7	Individual interviews	7
Field instructors	13	Focus group #1	2
		Focus group #2	3
		Individual interviews	8
Social worker-clients	5	Individual interviews	5
Social service employers	14	Individual interviews	14
University administrators	0	--	0

Note. A total of 45 interviews/focus groups were conducted with 53 participants. Eight respondents met criteria for two separate stakeholder groups and participated in both interview protocols. Recruitment efforts for representatives from university administration were unsuccessful.

Data Analysis

The researcher used the constant comparative method of data analysis to identify themes from participant interviews, beginning with open coding and then axial coding data into groups and categories as patterns and relationships between concepts were discovered (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Member checks, where the researcher shares data and initial interpretations with participants to check their plausibility, were used throughout the project (Merriam, 2009); this approach applies principles of utilization-focused evaluation to help engage practitioners in the later application of findings to inform and improve practice (Patton, 2008). In the stakeholder

analysis, the researcher applied the basic stakeholder analysis technique (Bryson, 2004), stake analysis (Freeman, 1984), and a power versus interest grid (Bryson, Patton, & Bowman, 2011).

Findings

Four themes emerged from stakeholders' expectations for social work admission: gatekeeping for the purpose of professional suitability, a process of self-selection for students, an indicator of educational quality for the social work program, and progression of students' professional socialization as a social worker. It was revealed that external stakeholders were underrepresented in the social work admission process, while participants had compelling ideas about the benefits of expanded influence. Additionally, stakeholders revealed their perceptions of FBU's social work program were rooted in four indicators of quality: accreditation, student performance, social work instruction, and program administration.

Stakeholders in Social Work Admission

FBU faculty identified multiple stakeholders to baccalaureate program admission; the most primary stakeholder groups are represented visually in a stakeholder map in Figure 1. The map reflected nine categories of admission stakeholders that expanded into 12 more specific stakeholder groups. Of the 21 stakeholders, 11 were represented in this study. External stakeholders included students (pre-admitted students, those currently enrolled in the social work program, and denied applicants), alumni, field instructors, social service employers, the program's community advisory council, social work clients, and adjunct faculty members, all of whom had some representation in the study. Accrediting bodies, another external stakeholder, were not represented in the study. As

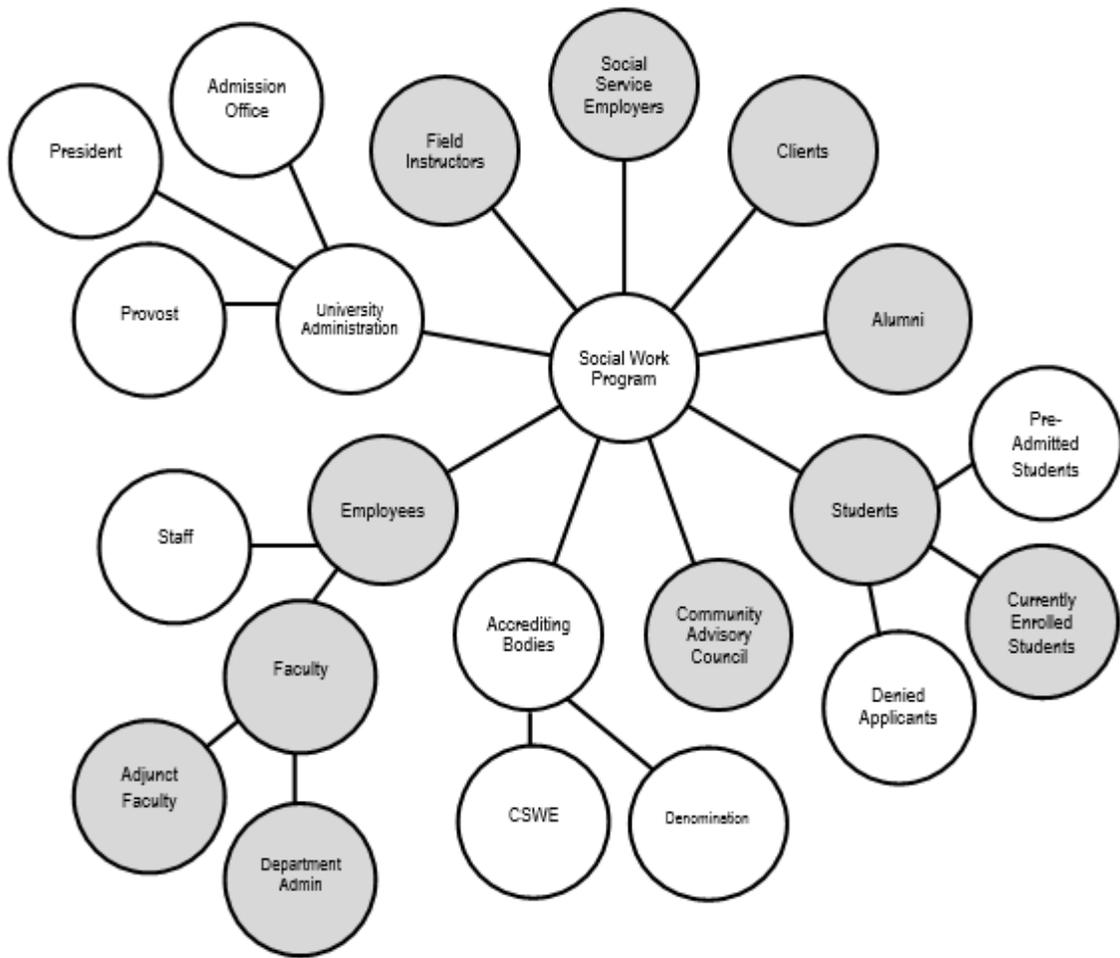


Figure 1. Stakeholder map of baccalaureate social work admission. Groups represented through interviews/focus groups in this study are shaded.

fulltime employees and members of the university organization, fulltime faculty, staff, department and university administrators held internal stakeholder positions.

Next, it was necessary to evaluate what the key concerns and interests in social work admission were for the various stakeholders. In essence, what was at stake for them regarding candidates' admission to a baccalaureate social work program? There was a range of stakes in social work admission. Understandably, university employees were interested in job security and, by extension, program enrollments. Field instructors and social service employers were invested in the quality of students/alumni who present to them as prospective interns and employees. For some groups, the stakes in admission were highly personal. Students, for example, viewed admission as a gateway to achieving their career goals and professional calling. Faculty strongly identified with the program's academic reputation in the social work community as well as their commitment to mentoring students. A stake consistent across all groups comprised of social workers was a concern for well-being of clients and the social work profession, whether that manifests itself as contributions to the profession by faculty, career goals and preparation for practice for students and alumni, or quality services provided by competent practitioners. Figure 2 presents the array of admission interests among major stakeholder groups.

Stakeholder Expectations of Social Work Admission

Data analysis revealed four themes from stakeholders' expectations of social work admission: gatekeeping for the purpose of professional suitability, a process of self-selection for students, an indicator of educational quality, and progression of students' professional socialization as a social worker.

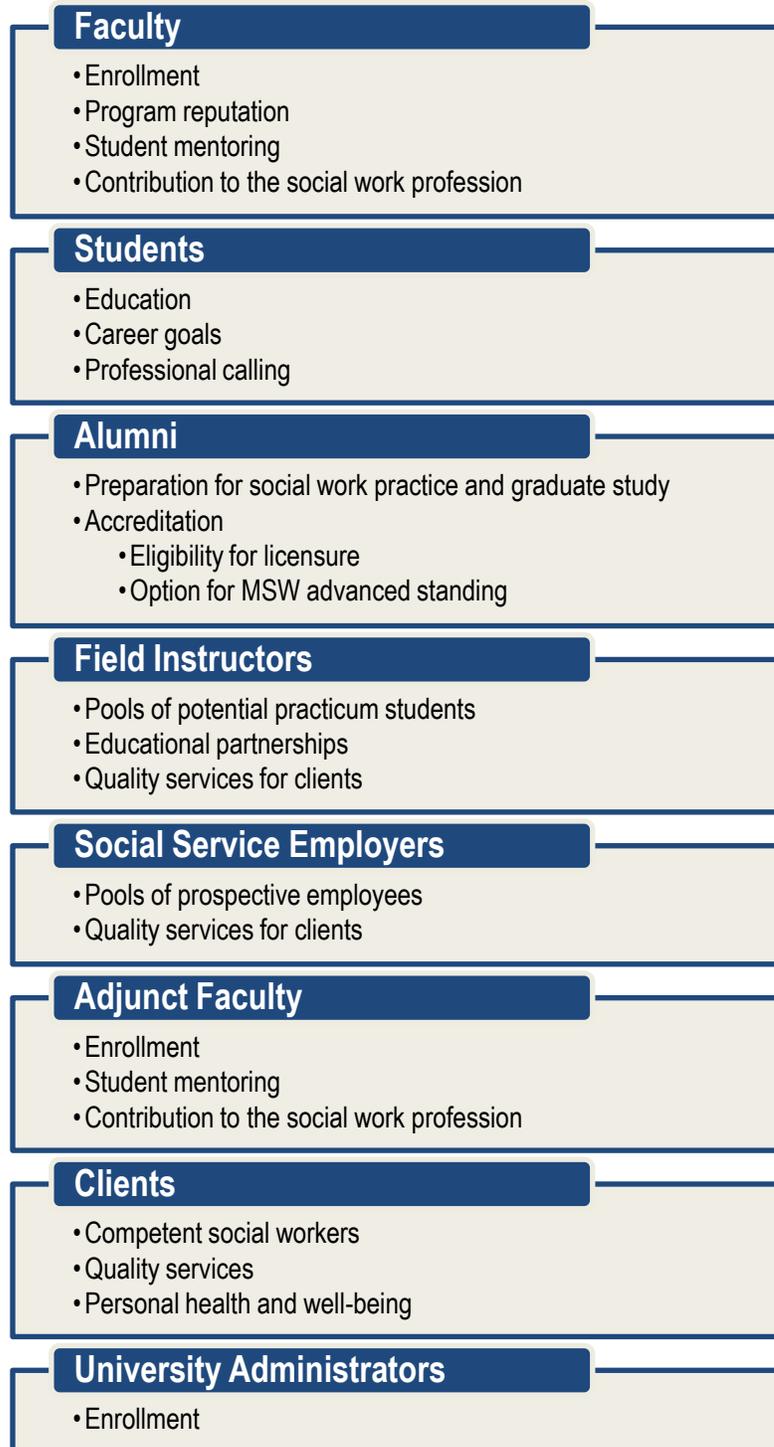


Figure 2. Stakeholder interests in baccalaureate social work admission. All groups comprised of social workers demonstrated a stake in the well-being of clients and the profession.

Gatekeeping for the purpose of professional suitability. Across all stakeholder groups, respondents were united in their opinion that admission to social work programs should be selective, defined as a process of assessing candidates' academic potential and evaluating personal characteristics, or suitability, for the practice of social work (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam & Kwok, 2007; Younes, 1998). Stakeholders asserted that social work admission should be selective in order to assess candidates' professional suitability (also match or fit) with the profession, described repeatedly as one's "heart" for social work.

Admission serving a gatekeeping function for the social work profession was an important theme. One field instructor, a community organizer, described selective admission as "trying to determine their [candidates'] personal character as well as their academic performance if the profession is a good fit for them. I think that's how we guard the profession." Yet, ideas about safeguarding the profession were couched within a developmental framework, much how social workers assess and assist clients. Maintaining a developmental approach to admission, particularly for a baccalaureate social work program, was important to respondents. Another function of social work admission was to identify professional potential. As an employer in child welfare stated, "There's lots of room to grow and lots of room to develop, no matter your age," which should be considered during admission decision making to allow students the opportunity to learn and hone skills during undergraduate social work studies. Participants also indicated that admission decision makers should be cognizant of the wide variety of practice areas available to social workers, which support practitioners with many different backgrounds and talents. While all stakeholder groups expressed an expectation

that social work admission will include gatekeeping for professional suitability, it was not surprising to observe this theme received more focus from field instructors and employers. These practitioners interact with front-line service providers and are impacted directly when practicum students or employees are not well suited for social work practice and subsequently experience significant difficulties in the field.

Process of self-selection for students. The second theme to emerge for social work admission was the expectation that applicants will engage in a process of self-selection for the profession. An employer in the field of developmental disabilities described the admission process as pushing students to self-assess: “There has to be some sort of drive...[an] intrinsic, internal motivation to do social work...The risk for compassion fatigue is very high, and so I think assessing for: ‘Do you really, really, really want to do this?’ is necessary.” All stakeholder groups strongly endorsed the practice of social work applicants writing personal statements or essays that describe their motivations for choosing a social work career, why they are a good fit for the profession, and how they interpret professional values. Personal statements are an important opportunity for self-reflection as well as a measure of their commitment to the profession, to the future volunteer requirements of the program, and to a time-intensive practicum experience later in their studies.

Current FBU students noted they had personally benefited from the self-reflection and self-selection process. A sophomore student who had just been admitted to the BSW program expressed that the application process gave her a better sense of what she wanted to do with her career: “It’s kind of nice to reflect and to see where you’ve come from and what you’ve been through in order to show where you are now and what your

current passion is.” One senior stated, “I think the essay part...definitely helps you to evaluate: What is my reasoning why I want to go into social work?...What is my overall goal and reasoning...to pursue social work and...make this commitment to become a social worker?” Another senior observed, “It’s a good self-reflection time and seeing if this is the direction you want to go.” Alumni concurred. One alumna recalled, “We were nervous when we were applying...Having that process...definitely helps you to be more motivated...It helps you realize you’re willing to put in the time and if you think you are a good fit for the program.”

Indicator of educational quality. Stakeholders expected the social work department’s admission practices to reflect high educational quality within the program. All stakeholder groups interpreted selective admission practices as an indicator of educational quality. By requiring admission criteria, social work programs are setting standards of excellence for both the social work program and the profession. With admission standards and academic rigor that continues throughout the BSW degree, social work programs contribute to the credibility and legitimacy of social work as a profession—not just a major. An adoption agency administrator said, “Doing a selection process...gives people some pride and some ownership over what social work is and what our profession is about. It raises us to another level.” One of the practitioners whose history as a client led to his social work career remarked, “I don’t know if you want to go to a school that accepts every single person that applies there.”

Demands of social work practice are high. Employers trust that faculty provide a quality educational experience for students and rely on social work programs to ensure that graduates have been screened for basic skills and social work competence. One

employer noted, “We’re really counting on the schools to vet people for us.” Ideally, selective admission practices result in better employees. All stakeholder groups indicated that students should be exposed to as many real social work experiences as possible during their undergraduate studies through job shadowing and volunteering to include interactions with diverse populations in multiple agency settings. Other experiential learning by means of practice simulations and role-plays was strongly endorsed. Several veteran field instructors suggested that a formal, “mini” practicum be introduced in addition and prior to students’ senior-year field placement.

Stakeholders also noted that admission practices set the tone, quality, and standards of professionalism within a social work program. Interactions with students during admission mattered enormously. Student and alumni experiences during admission became well known in the social work practice community, as recounted to field instructors during practicum or later to employers. Positive admission interactions with clear, consistent, and timely communication contributed to pride and ownership among students/alumni and faculty. Issues of miscommunication and confusion created uncertainty and insecurity and negatively impacted students’ and practitioners’ confidence in a social work program. A field instructor who provides clinical services at a residential facility for youth shared, “From the very beginning in the admissions process you set a standard. You set a standard for the program...a standard for the instructors...a standard for how the community views you. You’re also setting a standard for the student.” She continued, “It sets that standard of: We intend to be taken seriously...I think that could set the tone for the rest of their experience in the program.”

Progression of professional socialization. For social work students, the formal admission process is a progression of professional socialization, which began with introductory, preadmission courses. Students and alumni clearly interpreted admission to their BSW program as an important demarcation in their career development and internalization of their identity as a professional social worker. A participant in the junior-class focus group reported, “I do like that we had to go through the [admission] process. I think it really did...validate me as a student...I have to actually go through the process of becoming a social worker. I think that is really nice.”

Personal statements and interviews can help facilitate professional socialization in addition to their utility in the student self-selection process. For interviews, students are expected to dress professionally, communicate professionally, and demonstrate professional demeanor. Employers, particularly, noted that admission interviews serve as preparation and practice for students’ future job searches. With personal statements, students are frequently required to identify career goals and interest areas in the field. In doing so, applicants are projecting themselves into the role of a social worker. An alumna described her response and new focus after her admission to the BSW program: “Finding out I was accepted was really exciting. It made me feel like: This is my second half of my college, my undergrad, and it’s going to be so focused and it’s going to be in social work.” She was determined, “I know what I’m doing and I’m married to it.”

For students, BSW admission was an important professional socialization experience, one so important many suggested that faculty take steps to elevate its importance. In a student focus group, one participant noted, “There are only three programs on the entire [FBU] campus that you have to apply for...I think it’s funny that

we don't make a big deal of it like: 'I got accepted!'" She explained further, "Because you see people: 'I got my education acceptance paper! I got my nursing acceptance paper!' But we're like, 'Okay. I got my [social work] acceptance paper. Let's keep moving forward.'" Another student added, "Because [in] other programs people make a big deal about getting in...Even though [BSW admission] it's a big accomplishment to me, I don't know if it's a big accomplishment for the university." Students felt the understated approach at admission undermined credibility of the application process and prestige of the social work program. See an overview of stakeholder expectations for social work admission in Figure 3.



Figure 3. An overview of stakeholder expectations for social work admission at FBU.

Stakeholder Representation in Social Work Admission

The topic of including multiple stakeholder groups, not just fulltime faculty, in the admission process to social work programs was not something that many participants had considered. Several participants felt that social work faculty, alone, successfully oversaw

BSW admission. Nonetheless, there was overwhelming support for more formalized representation of multiple stakeholder groups in social work admission processes. Ideas about which stakeholder groups should be included in social work admission and the benefits of purposeful inclusion of external stakeholders emerged clearly and strongly.

External stakeholder groups in social work admission. External stakeholder groups were distanced from the BSW admission process. Field instructors, social service employers, social work clients, and adjunct faculty members had little-to-no knowledge, awareness, or participation in social work admission. The voice of external stakeholders was limited to representation through applicants' letters of reference required for the BSW application, which included references from a faculty member, the student's academic advisor, and an employer/volunteer supervisor. With enthusiasm, the study's participants affirmed the idea of increased, purposeful involvement and engagement of stakeholders in program admission. A mental health employer responded, "Wouldn't it be awesome if you had...administrators from community agencies be a part of that [admission]? We're the ones...in the field hiring these people. I think I would totally be a part of that. I think that would be awesome."

The stakeholder groups most frequently suggested for inclusion in the admission process were current social work practitioners, student representatives, and adjunct faculty. In the category of current social work practitioners, representatives from the program's experienced field instructors, social service employers in the community, and the program's advisory council were recommended. Expectation for stakeholder involvement was service in an advisory capacity to provide feedback and perspectives in addition to the fulltime faculty's observations. There was a strong value placed on

representation of social workers currently engaged in the field to supplement faculty's expertise, which was highly respected but may be several years from active practice.

Benefits of stakeholder representation in social work admission. Stakeholders supported expanded representation in the social work admission process and noted several benefits in providing current perspectives from the workplace and profession. Greater objectivity might be attained, as field instructors and social service employers would be unlikely to have interacted with students prior to their BSW admission; whereas, faculty have already interacted with candidates through preadmission coursework and academic advising. The fresh perspectives could provide an outsider's affirmation of red flags observed by faculty, a foil to potential biases/history that faculty may have with students, or a different viewpoint given the demands of various social work practice settings.

Including stakeholders who represent diversity not only demographically but also from the wide range of social work practice settings would expand students' knowledge of the field. Formally involving adjunct faculty could help ensure that important information about students is not lost. Representation of senior-level students could facilitate mentoring, be it formally or informally, between upper and lower classes. Practitioners endorsed an empowerment theme related to student representation during admission, likening the inclusion of student representation to practice standards of including consumers (clients) in the helping process. Stakeholders also saw expanded participation as an opportunity to provide individualized feedback to candidates to further their professional development. Feedback on their applications, writing skills, and interview performances could be incorporated into students' future coursework,

consultations with their academic advisors, and coaching with instructors. Practitioners saw participation in admission as a form of service, giving back to the profession and helping to mold future social work professionals. A field instructor in juvenile justice noted, “I think it would be pretty neat to be able to see that [BSW admission] and watch them [new students] grow through the whole thing.”

Stakeholder Perceptions of the Social Work Program

Stakeholders were queried about factors that impact a social work program’s reputation regarding admission practices. Responses, however, expanded well beyond the sphere of program admission and addressed program quality in general. While these findings move beyond the scope of program admission, they are noteworthy and, therefore, will be included in this report. During interviews, comments about the program’s strengths came unsolicited in the semistructured interview format. While stakeholders remarked on strengths of the FBU social work program, they did not seize the opportunity to voice complaints or perceived weaknesses of the program. Stakeholders highlighted program quality at FBU in four areas: accreditation, student performance, instruction, and program administration.

Accreditation. The program’s accreditation by CSWE was a common source of pride and distinction among students and alumni. Participants noted that accreditation, particularly for a faith-based school, was a program strength. Numerous students and alumni remarked that the program’s history of BSW accreditation and reputation among denominational schools were deciding factors in their choice to attend FBU. Further, students and alumni were fully aware of the professional benefits that CSWE accreditation brings to an undergraduate social work degree. Specifically, they noted

eligibility for professional licensure and advanced standing in graduate schools of social work.

Student Performance. Stakeholder assessment of FBU social work students' performance was based primarily on two types of interactions: peer-to-peer contacts and field instruction. Students and alumni reported that peers' word-of-mouth experiences were positive forces that contributed greatly to the social work program's reputation. For example, students described learning about the major from upperclassmen in the dorms with their interests in social work piqued by hearing about others' volunteer and practicum experiences. In addition, field instructors have a special vantage point to provide feedback on students' performance. Field instructors noted that FBU students appear better prepared for practicum as compared to other regional social work programs. FBU students demonstrated advanced communication skills, better interviewing skills, and higher professionalism such as dress and demeanor. One field instructor described FBU students as "polished."

Social Work Instruction. The BSW program at FBU has earned a high-quality reputation. Contributing significantly to its reputation were a consistent curriculum as well as longevity and stability among faculty members. For field instructors and employers, a marked strength of the FBU program is its high expectations for student involvement in volunteering, social work events, and community activities. Students and alumni felt they were challenged to perform at high levels in the classroom, and they believed the program's faith connections made long-lasting impressions in their personal and professional lives. For students who later pursued graduate study, many described having much greater academic preparation than their peers who attended other

undergraduate institutions. Multiple field instructors noted the program’s use of StrengthsQuest™ as a positive addition to the social work curriculum. This was a highly valued tool among some field instructors who have incorporated its use into supervision with their practicum students to facilitate self-reflection and self-awareness and students’ use of their personal strengths as developing, new professionals.

Program Administration. FBU’s reputation for consistent program administration and oversight was important to field instructors. Specifically, field instructors appreciated the open communication between themselves and the program, faculty’s responsiveness, and the support they experienced when dealing with challenging practicum situations. Both field instructors and employers felt they had strong relationships with the FBU social work program and faculty. See Figure 4 for an overview of the social work program’s organizational strengths identified through this stakeholder analysis.

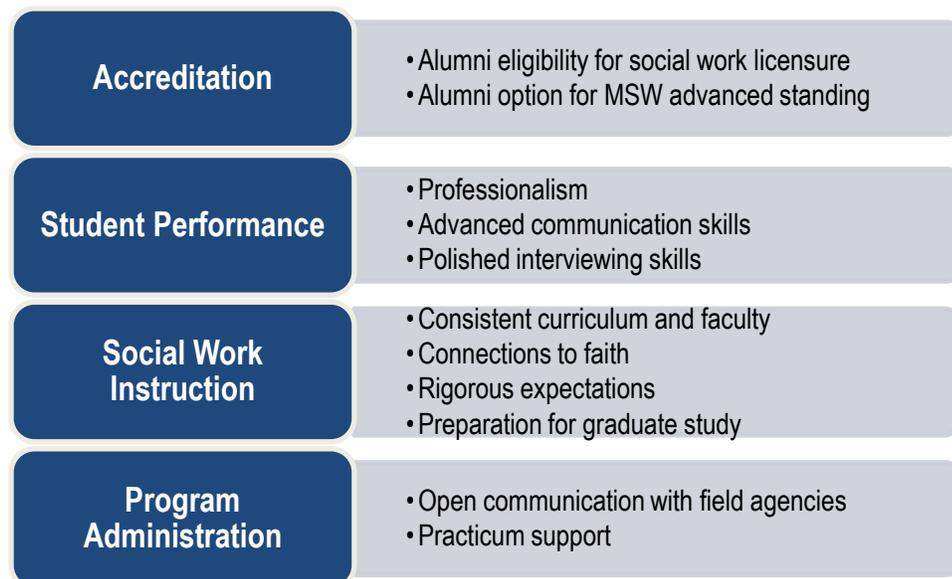


Figure 4. Strengths of the FBU social work program as identified by external stakeholders.

Limitations of the Study

While the researcher engaged techniques of member checks, prolonged engagement, audit trail, and reflexivity to increase trustworthiness (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006; Merriam, 2009), there remain limitations within the design. First, bias is complicated by the author's dual roles as researcher and employee in the study's setting. Researcher positioning will have influenced the study's sample and data analysis. The researcher engaged in data triangulation by conducting interviews and focus groups at different times, in different places, with different participants representing multiple stakeholders groups and then comparing data (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). However, a limitation of single-investigator design is the lack of investigator triangulation in which multiple researchers collect and analyze data and compare findings (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Another limitation was the failure to recruit participants from the stakeholder group of university administration. University administrators have significant influence over social work programs and their faculty, particularly in times of financial stress within higher education. Inclusion of their firsthand perspectives on selective admission would have strengthened this stakeholder analysis. The researcher sought perspectives from under-represented stakeholders to social work admission. Contrasted in the stakeholder map (Figure 1), the study fails to include representatives from such groups as social work program staff, accrediting organizations, pre-admitted students, and denied applicants.

Linkages to Implicit Curriculum

Admission can be framed as a mutual-selection process with students participating in self-selection as they reflectively complete their BSW applications.

Conceptualizing admission as serving in the progression of candidates' professional socialization can help social work educators more purposefully use admission to further students' professional development. Admission can be framed as an extension of the educational process for social work students and is a component of implicit curriculum, which encompasses the program's learning environment and, specifically, admissions policies and procedures (CSWE, 2015). Paying greater attention to the process of admission as a function of professional socialization is consistent with using implicit curriculum's role in "shaping personal character and competence of the program's graduates" (CSWE, 2015, p. 14). Efforts to promote professional socialization during admission can be expanded to include external stakeholders. Stakeholder involvement in the interview process can provide useful feedback for faculty on the need to revise admission criteria or curriculum content and strengthen programs' connections and collaborations with the practice community. Practitioners' feedback on student performance at the interviews can be used in future academic advising as admitted students proceed in the social work major.

Additionally, including external stakeholders in the admission process can promote greater diversity by augmenting a faculty whose own diversity is small and potentially developing mentoring relationships between students and social workers from underrepresented groups. There will be challenges in expanding stakeholder participation in admission, including increased time commitments, scheduling, and logistics. Nonetheless, there would appear to be value in the process for the various stakeholders.

Recommendations

There are numerous stakeholders to admission in social work programs; the majority of whom are external to the university system (see Figure 1). Yet, the external stakeholders were largely unrepresented in the admission process. According to stakeholders, admission serves a highly important function in progressing students' professional socialization as they begin to assume an identity as a professional social worker, in particular, through participation in admission interviews. Stakeholders also noted that a strength of the FBU social work program is high-quality instruction which includes significant student involvement in volunteering, job shadowing, social work events, and community activities.

Based on results of the stakeholder analysis, the following recommendations are suggested for the FBU social work program:

1. *Be more purposeful in promoting professional socialization during the admission process.*
 - Celebrate the admission process. Distinguish and acknowledge the achievement of admission with students.
 - Advertise the social work major on campus.
2. *Incorporate personal interviews in the admission process.*
 - Facilitate students' professional socialization through personal interviews.
 - Prepare students for future practicum and employment interviews.
 - Connect relationally with students through personal interviews.
3. *Expand participation of external stakeholder groups in social work admission.*
 - Seek adjunct faculty's input regarding students' performance and professional suitability, particularly in key gatekeeping points at admission and pre-practicum.

- Invite community social workers to participate in student admission interviews.
 - Include senior-level student representatives in admission interviews and/or mentoring with applicants.
4. *Expose students to multiple social work practice experiences pre-practicum.*
- Continue high expectations for student participation in pre-practicum activities such as volunteering and job shadowing with community social service agencies.
 - Consider formalizing a mini-practicum experience prior to senior year.
 - Host panels of professional social workers to speak and present on campus.

Conclusion

The primary stakeholders of admission to the BSW program included fulltime faculty, currently admitted students, alumni, field instructors, social services employers, adjunct faculty, university administrators, and clients. Overwhelmingly, participants favored selective admission policies for social work programs. Stakeholder expectations for BSW admission presented in four themes: gatekeeping for the purpose of professional suitability, a process of self-selection for students, an indicator of educational quality in the social work program, and progression of students' professional socialization as a social worker.

At FBU, the BSW admission process was faculty-centered, meaning external stakeholders such as field instructors, social service employers, and adjunct faculty were not widely represented in the admission process beyond the use of reference letters. Stakeholders supported expanded roles in admission to include current social work practitioners, student representatives, and adjunct faculty in particular. FBU enjoys a strong and positive reputation within its social work community in four important areas: accreditation, student performance, instruction, and program administration.

Much can be learned from stakeholders to help faculty oversee admission to the social work program. Results reflect numerous strengths of the social work program at FBU. In addition, findings illuminate areas of growth for stakeholder development and connection-building between the social work program and the professional social work community.

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SECTION FIVE:
CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

A Stakeholder Analysis of Admission in a Baccalaureate Social Work Program

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A Stakeholder Analysis of Admission in a Baccalaureate Social Work Program

Abstract

Social work programs shape the profession through their admission practices. The author completed a stakeholder analysis of a baccalaureate social work program to seek stakeholder perspectives on admission practices by conducting interviews and focus groups with 53 participants representing seven stakeholder groups. Results suggest that external stakeholders such as field instructors, social service employers, and adjunct faculty members are not widely represented in the BSW admission process. Four categories of stakeholder expectations for social work admission were found: gatekeeping for professional suitability, a process of self-reflection for students, an indicator of educational quality for the social work program, and progression of students' professional socialization as a social worker. Findings provide insights to inform faculty as they oversee social work admission.

A Stakeholder Analysis of Admission in a Baccalaureate Social Work Program

Social work is a profession whose core values embrace helping marginalized and oppressed populations. Because of their mission to serve vulnerable people, social workers must demonstrate ethical behaviors and competent practice skills. Professional gatekeeping, a controversial topic within social work education, is defined as “preventing the graduation of students who are not equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and values for professional practice” (Koerin & Miller, 1995, p. 247). Therefore, admission, as the entry point to social work programs, serves a highly important role in social work education. Admission processes are a time and resource-rich endeavor for social work programs (Bridge, 1996; Munro, 1995); finding effective screening mechanisms for program admission is challenging (Tam, 2003). Though addressed regularly in the literature, admission and gatekeeping procedures continue to be significant problems of practice for social work educators.

Once admitted, few social work students are subsequently terminated from their programs (Born & Carroll, 1988; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Sowbel, 2011). Poorly performing graduates and practicum students harm the reputation of social work programs (Tam & Kwok, 2007). Program integrity requires high evaluative standards at multiple checkpoints of social work education: admission, coursework, field practicum, and graduation (Madden, 2000). Evidence suggests that gatekeeping at the other educational stages is weak, with issues of grade inflation and low rates of student attrition or termination (Hepler & Noble, 1990; Miller, 2014; Sowbel, 2011). If other gatekeeping checkpoints are ineffective, then program admission becomes all the more crucial and worthy of additional study.

The body of social work literature on admission and gatekeeping includes many theoretical and practice pieces, addressing the topic of gatekeeping within a policy framework such as what elements gatekeeping policies should include (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013; Huff & Hodges, 2010; Urwin, Van Soest, & Kretzschmar, 2006), legal aspects of gatekeeping (Cole, 1991; Cole & Lewis, 1993), and negative behaviors that gatekeeping policies should address (Moore, Dietz, & Jenkins, 1998; Morrow, 2000). Empirical studies tend to focus on identifying admission variables that could predict student success in social work programs, such as grade point average (Dunlap, Henley, & Fraser, 1998; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Holmström & Taylor, 2008; Pelech, Stalker, Regehr, & Jacobs, 1999; Reynolds, 2004; Schmidt, 2007; Thomas, McCleary, & Henry, 2004), personal statements (Fortune, 2003; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Munro, 1995; Pelech et al., 1999; Regehr, Stalker, Jacobs, & Pelech, 2001), candidate interviews (Holmström & Taylor, 2008; Munro, 1995), and reference letters (Holmström & Taylor, 2008; Munro, 1995; Pelech et al., 1999; Thomas et al., 2004).

Significantly, many gatekeeping and admission studies tend to survey and present the perspective of program administrators only (Tam, 2003). Additionally, the literature addresses social work educators as having ethical obligations to various constituencies during admission and gatekeeping (Born & Carroll, 1988; Curren & Atherton, 2008; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Lafrance, Gray, & Herbert, 2004; Regehr et al., 2001; Sowbel, 2012). Nevertheless, this conversation rarely frames the affected groups as stakeholders to the admission process or discusses how various stakeholder interests are represented in admission. The purpose of this study is to identify who the stakeholders are in social work program admission by conducting a stakeholder analysis, assessing what the

various groups want/expect from social work admission, and evaluating how multiple interests are represented in the admission process. An overview of social work admission literature is presented, along with the conceptual framework of stakeholder theory, the study's design, findings, and discussion.

Purpose of Selective Admission

“The [social work] admissions process is the mechanism for attracting students who learn from and contribute to the educational process, have potential for practice, and effectively use communication and personal skills in the educational experience” (Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 124). Admission policies and processes shape the profession of social work by controlling who is allowed access to education and to matriculate into practice following graduation (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002). When programs establish admission criteria and the mechanisms by which to measure candidates' fit, they establish an “admission climate along a continuum from open to exclusive enrollment” (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 295). Selective admission, specifically, serves two purposes: assessing candidates' academic potential and evaluating candidates' personal characteristics, or suitability, for the practice of social work (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam & Kwok, 2007; Younes, 1998). Admission should identify students most likely to succeed in social work programs who are equipped to meet the challenges of social work practice after graduation (Seipel, Walton, & Johnson, 2011).

Admission Gatekeeping Philosophies

Philosophically, admission gatekeeping can be conceptualized from two viewpoints: screening-in students or screening-out applicants (Gibbs, 2000; Madden, 2000). A screening-in approach applies a developmental focus on students' skill

building, while a screening-out mindset applies admission standards more deliberately as a preventative gatekeeping function (Gibbs, 2000; Madden, 2000). Faculty's philosophical orientation toward gatekeeping certainly influences a department's admission policies. Lafrance et al. (2004) posed the important question for admission decisions: Are faculty discerning if students are unsuitable or just unready for social work practice? Rather than viewing candidates as unsuitable for the profession, a screening-in philosophy frames students as unprepared—prior to participating in the professional socialization process of their educational experiences. In contrast, a screening-out approach “selectively closes the gate” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 150) during the process of social work education at varying points including admission, coursework, or practicum. Arguably, a screening-out position risks excluding students who could very well succeed in a social work program (Madden, 2000).

Perceptions of Admission Gatekeeping

One way, if not the primary means, of achieving gatekeeping objectives is through selective program admission. However, social work literature often addresses professional gatekeeping with a focus on interventions with continuing students, meaning those who are already admitted to social work programs, more so than on the process of program admission. Faculty members have expressed concern with how admission processes are administered. “It is important to exercise caution in the development of [admission] criteria lest they contradict social work values which promote a non-judgmental acceptance of individual differences, a belief in the capacity for change, and respect for...self-determination” (Lafrance et al., 2004, pp. 337-338). Yet, Ryan, Habibis, and Craft (1997) countered in support of stronger gatekeeping at admission, reasoning

that faculty members often dedicate much time and energy in addressing students' problems after admission.

Field instructors have reported that professional suitability is important to social work practice, yet personal qualities were generally weighted least during admission reviews (Lafrance et al., 2004). Additionally, social service employers "rely on social work educators to ensure that graduates enter the field with a level of competence required for professional service delivery" (Ryan et al., 1997, p. 5). However, there is limited documentation of representation among employers/practitioners in the admission process for social work programs in the United States. In an international study, Shardlow, Scholar, Munro, and McLaughlin (2011) examined the "extent and nature of employer involvement in...selection and admissions procedures" (p. 207) for social work programs. Internationally, employer involvement is stipulated for some social work programs, which differs from accreditation standards in the United States. Overall, the study found little influence by employers on program admission in relation to student recruitment, admission criteria, or admission procedures.

Hagar (2000) described an admission process in which a panel comprised of social work practitioners conducted interviews with BSW applicants. The practitioners catalogued a list of essential qualities and aptitudes for social work practice and developed a 15-minute interview protocol with candidates. While the students described the experience as anxiety-producing, they appreciated the opportunity to meet and talk with current practitioners in the field. The practitioners, too, were positive about their experiences and the collaborative role in program admission. What is unknown,

however, is how practitioners' evaluation of candidates compared to faculty's in predicting student success.

“Schools of social work are expected to effectively implement the gatekeeping function in order to prevent unsuitable individuals from entering the field of practice” (Tam & Kwok, 2007, p. 195). Gatekeeping roles are filled in multiple ways throughout the progression of a social work career. Social work faculty members serve as the primary professional gatekeepers at admission to educational programs. During field practicum, field instructors join faculty in assessing students' abilities. After graduation, employers and professional organizations, such as licensing bodies, then serve as gatekeepers to the field (Tam & Kwok, 2007).

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework by which the study is supported and designed is Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory in which the term *stakeholder* encompasses “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives” (p. 46). Social work education involves a system of parties, including faculty, university administrators, field instructors, students, social service employers, and clients (Tam & Coleman, 2009). Conceptualizing social work programs as educational systems supports application of a stakeholder theoretical framework for understanding perceptions of admission and gatekeeping. A stakeholder approach is meaningful, given social work programs' interdependence with the practice community for the signature pedagogy of field education and social work's professional value of providing service in the community.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. Who are the stakeholder groups for social work admission?
2. What do stakeholder groups want/expect from social work admission?
3. How are stakeholder interests represented in social work admission?

Methods

Design and Sample

The researcher conducted a stakeholder analysis of social work admission at a small, Midwestern liberal arts university with a baccalaureate social work enrollment of over 60 students. First, study participants were identified at two levels: stakeholder groups and specific individuals who represent those groups. With literature support, purposeful sampling predetermined the following stakeholder groups, at a minimum, should be represented in the study: faculty (Curren & Atherton, 2008), students (Campbell, Campbell, & Das, 2013), field instructors (Lafrance et al., 2004), social service employers (Seipel et al., 2011), university administration (Urwin et al., 2006), and clients (Manthorpe et al., 2010; Matka, River, Littlechild, & Powell, 2010). To seek feedback from a client perspective, the researcher sought participants who are social work practitioners and have been service receivers.

Stakeholder theory informed the sampling process, as the researcher conducted a stakeholder mapping activity with faculty to brainstorm groups with interests in the social work admission process (Freeman, 1984). The mapping process/group interview was the first effort at data collection, which resulted in the identification of an additional stakeholder group to represent in the study, specifically that alumni should be included in

the project. Using Freeman's (1984) mapping activity, the group interview helped identify selection criteria for stakeholder groups whose interests are salient to program admission while exercising member checking and peer review techniques (Merriam, 2009).

To identify participants representing the various stakeholder groups, the researcher used purposeful sampling techniques and established criteria for selecting individuals to represent each stakeholder group. For example, field instructors and social service employers must hold a social work degree, either BSW or MSW, and have proctored students or supervised staff for at least three years to ensure they had adequate experiences upon which to form opinions about admission and gatekeeping.

Furthermore, selection criteria also included participants from a variety of social work practice settings so comments would be more general in nature and not, for instance, attributed to perspectives of one area of social work specialization. The author, as a faculty member at the program under study, had contacts with prospective participants. Snowball sampling was used to recruit alumni participants. With institutional review board approval, the researcher conducted focus groups and individual interviews with 53 participants representing seven stakeholder groups: fulltime faculty, students currently admitted and enrolled in the BSW program, alumni of the program, field instructors, social service employers, adjunct faculty, and social work clients (defined as social workers who have also been service receivers). Eight participants interviewed in two different stakeholder groups. The researcher believed that allowing multiple interviews reflected reality within the system of social work education where social workers frequently hold dual roles, for example, hosting practicum students and teaching as an

adjunct educator. By limiting participation to just one stakeholder group, there was concern that some important voices would be omitted. Stakeholder theory supports this approach, recognizing that people hold multiple group memberships and, as a result, may experience conflicting perceptions (Freeman, 1984). The researcher sought representation from the stakeholder group of university administration, but attempts to recruit participants were unsuccessful. See Table 1 for a summary of interviews.

Data Analysis

“Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research” (Merriam, 2009, p. 165). Interviews were recorded and transcribed using the styling of McLellan, MacQueen, and Neidig (2003), and the researcher engaged in extensive memoing. After each interview, short summaries, or memos to self, were prepared to guide development of future questions, topics, and themes as the study progressed (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Using the constant comparative method of data analysis to identify themes and categories, the researcher first utilized open coding and then grouped the open codes into categories with axial coding to identify patterns of data and discover relationships between ideas and concepts (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009). In this project, the researcher triangulated data by comparing multiple sources of data collected in interviews and focus groups held at different times, in different places, with different participants representing multiple constituencies of stakeholders (Merriam, 2009). Member checks, where the researcher shares data and initial interpretations with participants to check their plausibility, were used throughout the project (Merriam, 2009); this approach applies principles of utilization-focused evaluation to help engage practitioners in the later application of

findings to inform and improve practice (Patton, 2008). In the stakeholder analysis, the researcher applied the basic stakeholder analysis technique (Bryson, 2004), stake analysis (Freeman, 1984), and a power versus interest grid (Bryson, Patton, & Bowman, 2011).

Findings

The stakeholder analysis confirmed the primary stakeholders of baccalaureate social work admission to include fulltime faculty, currently enrolled students, field instructors, social service employers, adjunct faculty, university administrators, and clients, along with the notable addition of alumni. When assessing stakeholder expectations for social work admission, four themes emerged: gatekeeping for the purpose of professional suitability, a process of self-selection for students, an indicator of educational quality for the social work program, and progression of students' professional socialization as a social worker. Further, it was revealed that external stakeholders were underrepresented in the social work admission process, while participants had compelling ideas about the benefits of expanded influence.

Stakeholders in Social Work Admission

Faculty identified multiple stakeholders to baccalaureate program admission; the most primary stakeholder groups are represented visually in a stakeholder map in Figure 1. The map reflected nine categories of admission stakeholders that expanded into 12 more specific stakeholder groups. Of the 21 stakeholders, 11 were represented in this study. External stakeholders included students (pre-admitted students, those currently enrolled in the social work program, and denied applicants), alumni, field instructors, social service employers, the program's community advisory council, social work clients, and adjunct faculty members, all of whom had some representation in the study.

Accrediting bodies, another external stakeholder, were not represented in the study. As fulltime employees and members of the university organization, fulltime faculty, staff, department and university administrators held internal stakeholder positions.

Next, it was necessary to evaluate what the key concerns and interests in social work admission were for the various stakeholders. In essence, what was at stake for them regarding candidates' admission to a baccalaureate social work program?

Understandably, university employees including administrators, fulltime faculty, and adjunct instructors were interested in job security and, by extension, program enrollments. Field instructors and social service employers were invested in the quality of students/alumni who present to them as prospective interns and employees. For some groups, the stakes in admission were highly personal. Students, for example, viewed admission as a gateway to achieving their career goals and professional calling. Faculty strongly identified with their program's academic reputation in the social work community as well as their commitment to mentoring students. A stake consistent across all groups comprised of social workers was a concern for well-being of clients and the social work profession, whether that manifests itself as contributions to the profession by faculty, career goals and preparation for practice for students and alumni, or quality services provided by competent practitioners. Figure 2 presents the array of admission interests among major stakeholder groups.

The stakeholder map (Figure 1) provided a pictorial representation of constituencies impacting and/or impacted by social work admission, but the map fails to reflect power differentials among the various stakeholder groups. A power versus interest grid is a two-by-two matrix for categorizing stakeholders (Bryson et al., 2011) in

dimensions of sociopolitical activity: *interest*, meaning their concerns and motivations about an issue, and *power*, defined as capacity to influence or act on an issue due to their position (Wilson & Cervero, 2010). The grid is a general model depicting relative positioning without absolute scales (Bryson et al., 2011) to help social work programs identify the categories that apply to stakeholder groups. Figure 3 highlights various stakeholders' level of interest in social work admission as well as their power to affect admission. Findings indicated that admission practices were faculty-centric; fulltime faculty have both high interest and high power in the issue of social work admission. As such, faculty were categorized as *players* and most other stakeholder groups, such as students, field instructors, employers, and adjunct faculty, as *subjects*. University administrators, with high power but lower interest, were *context setters*. Clients were placed into the *crowd* category because they wield little to no power in social work admission.

Stakeholder Expectations of Social Work Admission

The stakeholder map (Figure 1), stake analysis (Figure 2), and power versus interest grid (Figure 3) demonstrated dynamics within the system of social work education regarding admission. What do these stakeholders expect from the admission process? Data analysis revealed four themes from stakeholders' expectations of social work admission: gatekeeping for the purpose of professional suitability, a process of self-selection for students, an indicator of educational quality, and progression of students' professional socialization as a social worker.

Gatekeeping for the purpose of professional suitability. Across all stakeholder groups, respondents were united in their opinion that admission to social work programs

should be selective, defined as a process of assessing candidates' academic potential and evaluating personal characteristics, or suitability, for the practice of social work (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam & Kwok, 2007; Younes, 1998). On the rare occasion that participants expressed some hesitation on the topic of selective versus open admission (5 out of 53 respondents), they eventually described criteria that should be established as minimal standards for admission to a social work program. Their concerns about selective admission were rooted in social justice ideals such as avoiding exclusionary practices, ensuring fair selection processes, and overcoming selectivity bias.

Stakeholders asserted that social work admission should be selective in order to assess candidates' professional suitability (also match or fit) with the profession, described repeatedly as one's "heart" for social work. One employer who is a mental health provider stated, "It has to be more than a job, and that goes into the part where you have to have that heart and that compassion." A robust theme found across all stakeholder groups was that social work is a "calling." An alumna explained, "Because social work is such an intense career choice, I think it's a calling...I think that it does take special people to work as social workers." Regarding selective admission, she added, "I think that some of the people I saw who were weeded out in that process of doing the application...I feel like that was actually a healthy and good way to do it." Additionally, candidates for social work programs must demonstrate "passion" for the field or face professional challenges such as high job turnover or burn-out.

Admission serving a gatekeeping function for the social work profession was an important theme. One field instructor, a community organizer, described selective

admission as “trying to determine their [candidates’] personal character as well as their academic performance if the profession is a good fit for them. I think that’s how we guard the profession.” Ideas about safeguarding the profession were couched within a developmental framework, much how social workers assess and assist clients.

Maintaining a developmental approach to admission, particularly for a BSW program, was important to respondents. Another function of social work admission was to identify professional potential. An employer in child welfare stated, “There’s lots of room to grow and lots of room to develop, no matter your age,” which should be considered during admission decision making to allow students the opportunity to learn and hone skills during undergraduate social work studies. Participants also indicated that admission decision makers should be cognizant of the wide variety of practice areas available to social workers, which support practitioners with many different backgrounds and talents. While all stakeholder groups expressed an expectation that social work admission will include gatekeeping for professional suitability, it was not surprising to observe this theme received more focus from field instructors and employers. These practitioners interact with front-line service providers and are impacted directly when practicum students or employees are not well suited for social work practice and subsequently experience significant difficulties in the field.

Process of self-selection for students. The second theme to emerge for social work admission was the expectation that applicants will engage in a process of self-selection for the profession. An employer in the field of developmental disabilities described the admission process as pushing students to self-assess: “There has to be some sort of drive...[an] intrinsic, internal motivation to do social work...The risk for

compassion fatigue is very high, and so I think assessing for: ‘Do you really, really, really want to do this?’ is necessary.” All stakeholder groups strongly endorsed the practice of social work applicants writing personal statements, which provides important opportunities for self-reflection on students’ fit with the profession, their personal motivations, and how they interpret professional values. The admission process can also be a measure of students’ commitment to the profession, to the future volunteer requirements of the program, and to a time-intensive practicum experience later in their studies. One contributor in the focus group of senior-class BSW students related the following story:

I had a friend in our intro to social work class...She ended up dropping out after the whole application process started because she realized that she didn’t really want to commit to the application... She started looking into other classes and requirements of the major. She realized that this isn’t what she wanted to do, so it kind of—not weeded her out—but showed her that [social work] was not what she wanted.

Current students noted they had personally benefited from the self-reflection and self-selection process. A sophomore student who had just been admitted to the BSW program expressed that the application process gave her a better sense of what she wanted to do with her career: “It’s kind of nice to reflect and to see where you’ve come from and what you’ve been through in order to show where you are now and what your current passion is.” One senior stated, “I think the essay part...definitely helps you to evaluate: What is my reasoning why I want to go into social work?...What is my overall goal and reasoning...to pursue social work and...make this commitment to become a

social worker?” Another senior observed, “It’s a good self-reflection time and seeing if this is the direction you want to go.” Alumni concurred. One alumna recalled, “We were nervous when we were applying...Having that process...definitely helps you to be more motivated...It helps you realize you’re willing to put in the time and if you think you are a good fit for the program.”

Indicator of educational quality. Stakeholders expected a social work department’s admission practices to reflect high educational quality within the program. All stakeholder groups interpreted selective admission practices as an indicator of educational quality. By requiring admission criteria, social work programs are setting standards of excellence for both the social work program and the profession. With admission standards and academic rigor that continues throughout the BSW degree, social work programs contribute to the credibility and legitimacy of social work as a profession—not just a major. An adoption agency administrator said, “Doing a selection process...gives people some pride and some ownership over what social work is and what our profession is about. It raises us to another level.” A field instructor who practices in substance abuse treatment commented, “I think when you hear that it’s harder to get into a program, it gives it more credibility.” One of the practitioners whose history as a client led to his social work career remarked, “I don’t know if you want to go to a school that accepts every single person that applies there.”

Demands of social work practice are high. Employers trust that faculty provide a quality educational experience for students and rely on social work programs to ensure that graduates have been screened for basic skills and social work competence. One employer noted, “We’re really counting on the schools to vet people for us.” Ideally,

selective admission practices result in better employees. An employer in community mental health stated, “The only requirement for hiring a person in a community support specialist’s position is the degree...If you’re just letting anyone in to get a [social work] degree, that makes them eligible for that job...whether they really have a clue or not.” She then added, “I think being more particular about who gets to earn a social work degree means I’m going to have more quality applicants and more quality employees.” The reputation of a social work program within the social work community was certainly impacted by its admission practices. The same employer declared, “If you get an employee who has gone through the [social work] program and they’re not so great, it makes you question: Who are they letting in and what are they doing over there?” Ultimately, a desired outcome of social work education is high-quality services for clients.

Stakeholders also noted that admission practices set the tone, quality, and standards of professionalism within a social work program. Interactions with students during admission mattered enormously. Student and alumni experiences during admission became well known in the social work practice community, as recounted to field instructors during practicum or later to employers. Positive admission interactions with clear, consistent, and timely communication contributed to pride and ownership among students/alumni. Miscommunication and confusion created uncertainty and insecurity and negatively impacted students’ and practitioners’ confidence in a social work program. A field instructor who provides clinical services at a residential facility for youth shared, “From the very beginning in the admissions process you set a standard. You set a standard for the program...a standard for the instructors...a standard for how the

community views you. You're also setting a standard for the student." She continued, "It sets that standard of: We intend to be taken seriously...I think that could set the tone for the rest of their experience in the program."

Progression of professional socialization. For social work students, the formal admission process is a progression of professional socialization, which began with introductory, preadmission courses. Students and alumni clearly interpreted admission to their BSW program as an important demarcation in their career development and internalization of their identity as a professional social worker. A participant in the junior-class focus group reported, "I do like that we had to go through the [admission] process. I think it really did...validate me as a student...I have to actually go through the process of becoming a social worker. I think that is really nice." A faculty member described admission socialization as contributing to students' self-concept. "It's an accomplishment. I'm going to be able to do this...I'm wanted somewhere. I fit somewhere. I belong somewhere. I'm on the right track...Developmentally, that's a lot, for them to be validated [and] supported."

Personal statements and interviews can help facilitate professional socialization in addition to their utility in the student self-selection process. For interviews, students are expected to dress professionally, communicate professionally, and demonstrate professional demeanor. Employers, particularly, noted that admission interviews serve as preparation and practice for students' future job searches. With personal statements, students identify career goals and interest areas in the field. In doing so, applicants are projecting themselves into the role of a social worker. Admitted BSW students then begin upper-level, professional courses and continue forming their professional identities

as social workers. Admission was an important professional socialization experience for students.

Stakeholder Representation in Social Work Admission

The topic of including multiple stakeholder groups, not just fulltime faculty, in the admission process to social work programs was not something that many participants had considered. In the student focus groups, participants endorsed the current system of a faculty-centered admission process. Among field instructors, employers, adjunct faculty, alumni, and practitioner-clients, there was very strong support for more formalized representation of multiple stakeholder groups in social work admission processes. Only eight participants suggested that faculty, alone, should oversee BSW admission. Of the eight, three still thought including additional stakeholders would be beneficial, and two believed the logistics of adding stakeholders would be too complicated. Ideas about which stakeholder groups should be included in social work admission and the benefits of purposeful inclusion of external stakeholders emerged clearly and strongly.

External stakeholder groups in social work admission. External stakeholder groups were distanced from the BSW admission process. Field instructors, social service employers, social work clients, and adjunct faculty members had little-to-no knowledge, awareness, or participation in social work admission. The voice of external stakeholders was limited to representation through applicants' letters of reference required for the BSW application, which included references from a faculty member, the student's academic advisor, and an employer/volunteer supervisor. With enthusiasm, field instructors, employers, adjunct faculty, alumni, and practitioner-clients affirmed the idea of increased, purposeful involvement and engagement of stakeholders in program

admission. The community mental health employer was representative of the interest in participating on admission committees: “Wouldn’t it be awesome if you had...administrators from community agencies be a part of that [admission]? We’re the ones...in the field hiring these people. I think I would totally be a part of that. I think that would be awesome.”

Stakeholders most commonly suggested for inclusion in the admission process were current social work practitioners, student representatives, and adjunct faculty. In the category of current social work practitioners, representatives from the program’s experienced field instructors, social service employers in the community, and the program’s advisory council were recommended. Expectation for stakeholder involvement was service in an advisory capacity to provide feedback and perspectives in addition to the fulltime faculty’s observations. As one field instructor who is also an alumnus suggested, “They don’t get like a defining vote, but they just give input. Maybe they could even meet or interact with some of these people [students] at some point.” There was a strong value placed on representation of social workers currently engaged in the field to supplement faculty’s expertise, which was highly respected but may be several years from active practice.

Benefits of stakeholder representation in social work admission. Stakeholders supported expanded representation in the social work admission process and noted several benefits in providing current perspectives from the workplace and profession. Greater objectivity might be attained, as field instructors and social service employers would be unlikely to have interacted with students prior to their BSW admission; whereas, faculty have already interacted with candidates through preadmission

coursework and academic advising. The fresh perspectives could provide an outsider's affirmation of red flags observed by faculty, a foil to potential biases/history that faculty may have with students, or a different viewpoint given the demands of various social work practice settings.

Including stakeholders who represent diversity not only demographically but also from the wide range of social work practice settings would expand students' knowledge of the field. Formally involving adjunct faculty could help ensure that important information about students is not lost. Representation of senior-level students could facilitate mentoring, be it formally or informally, between upper and lower classes. Practitioners endorsed an empowerment theme related to student representation during admission, likening the inclusion of student representation to practice standards of including consumers (clients) in the helping process. Stakeholders also saw expanded participation as an opportunity to provide individualized feedback to candidates to further their professional development. Feedback on their applications, writing skills, and interview performances could be incorporated into students' future coursework, consultations with their academic advisors, and coaching with instructors. Practitioners saw participation in admission as a form of service, giving back to the profession and helping to mold future social work professionals. A field instructor in juvenile justice noted, "I think it would be pretty neat to be able to see that [BSW admission] and watch them [new students] grow through the whole thing."

Limitations of the Study

As Lietz, Langer, and Furman (2006) asserted, "qualitative researchers must engage in a variety of strategies in order to describe research findings in a way that

authentically represents the meanings as described by the participants” (p. 444). While the researcher engaged techniques of member checks, prolonged engagement, audit trail, and reflexivity to increase trustworthiness, there remain limitations within the design. Reflexivity, or the researcher’s position, is a process of constant reflection on the researcher’s role in the co-construction of meaning during the study (Lietz et al., 2006; Merriam, 2009). First, bias is complicated by the author’s dual roles as researcher and employee in the study’s setting. Researcher positioning will have influenced the study’s sample and data analysis. The researcher engaged in data triangulation by conducting interviews and focus groups at different times, in different places, with different participants representing multiple stakeholders groups and then comparing data (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). However, a limitation of single-investigator design is the lack of investigator triangulation in which multiple researchers collect and analyze data and compare findings (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015).

Another limitation was the failure to recruit participants from the stakeholder group of university administration. As a high-power but low-interest stakeholder, university administrators have significant influence over social work programs and their faculty, particularly in times of financial stress within higher education. Inclusion of their firsthand perspectives on selective admission would have strengthened this stakeholder analysis. The researcher sought perspectives from under-represented stakeholders to social work admission. Contrasted in the stakeholder map (Figure 1), the study fails to include representatives from such groups as social work program staff, accrediting organizations, pre-admitted students, and denied applicants. Finally, there is the issue of transferability within qualitative research. Generalizability in qualitative

research is conceptualized in terms of the study's reader and the how the findings may be applied to other settings and contexts (Merriam, 2009). This study reflects a small social work program. Larger departments may face different contexts regarding admission administration, and larger faculties may have greater diversity of ideas regarding admission and stakeholders. By providing detailed description and contextual details, the researcher hopes to allow readers to assess and decide how findings apply to their educational settings (Merriam, 2009).

Discussion

There are numerous stakeholders to admission in social work programs; the majority of whom are external to the university system (see Figure 1). In this study, the primary stakeholders of admission to the BSW program included fulltime faculty, currently enrolled students, alumni, field instructors, social services employers, adjunct faculty, university administrators, and clients. Yet, the external stakeholders were largely unrepresented in the admission process. Stakeholder theory suggested that systems function better when organizations manage relationships with stakeholders, seek information stakeholders hold, and respond to stakeholder interests (Bryson et al., 2011). Failure to incorporate stakeholders into the admission process seems a lost opportunity for social work educators, especially given the inter-connected nature of social work education and its signature pedagogy of field education which requires extensive partnering with community-based social service agencies and field instructors. Recognition of the importance in skillfully navigating multidisciplinary practice is now reflected in the *2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate and Master's Social Work Programs* in Competency 8, Behavior 3: "Use inter-

professional collaboration as appropriate to achieve beneficial practice outcomes” (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015, p. 9). It would appear that social work faculty could model this behavior with increased stakeholder participation in admission, embracing Cervero and Wilson’s (1994) critical viewpoint of adult education which promotes democracy (representation and shared decision-making), fosters dialogue (seeking feedback), furthers individual freedom (offering equal opportunity), and advances social justice (promoting full and equal participation), all of which are consistent with social work values.

Stakeholder interests in admission ranged from the personal, in career goals, contributions to the profession, and job security vis-à-vis enrollment, to macro concerns for qualified social workers and quality services for clients. Overwhelmingly, participants favored selective admission policies for social work programs. More specifically, stakeholder expectations for BSW admission presented in four themes: gatekeeping for the purpose of professional suitability, a process of self-selection for students, an indicator of educational quality, and progression of professional socialization as a social worker. In the study’s setting, the admission process was faculty-centered, meaning external stakeholders such as field instructors, social service employers, and adjunct faculty were not widely represented in the admission process beyond the use of reference letters. Participants supported expanded roles in admission to include current social work practitioners, student representatives, and adjunct faculty in particular.

Expectations of gatekeeping for professional suitability at admission are consistent with substantial social work literature that endorses the need to assess students’ fit with social work’s professional values and behaviors (Barlow & Coleman, 2003;

Currer & Atherton, 2008; Lafrance et al., 2004; Sowbel & Miller, 2015; Tam & Coleman, 2009). Attention to admission practices most often focuses on social work programs screening in (or, alternatively, screening out) candidates (Gibbs, 2000; Madden, 2000). More accurately, admission can be framed as a mutual-selection process with students participating in self-selection as they reflectively complete their BSW applications. There is also support for selective admission as a means of maintaining educational quality and professional standards. As Moore and Urwin (1990) asserted, “If educators believe in the value of the social work profession, they must demand that those who enter the profession be worthy of it” (p. 126). Furthermore, “if educators do not guard the gate, they cannot raise higher the status of social work or retain the confidence of society in the profession’s ability to deliver service” (Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 126).

Conceptualizing admission as serving in the progression of candidates’ professional socialization can help social work educators more purposefully use admission to further students’ professional development. As Gibbs and Macy (2000) noted, admission to a social work program is the first step toward “students’ personal aspirations, career opportunities, [and] state licensure for practice” (p. 8). Selective admission serves to “increase students’ identification with and commitment to the profession because individual capability and potential...are formally recognized and rewarded through sanctioned entry” (Gibbs & Macy, 2000, p. 8).

Admission can be framed as an extension of the educational process for social work students and is a component of implicit curriculum, which encompasses the program’s learning environment and, specifically, admissions policies and procedures (CSWE, 2015). Paying greater attention to the process of admission as a function of

professional socialization is consistent with using implicit curriculum's role in "shaping personal character and competence of the program's graduates" (CSWE, 2015, p. 14). Efforts to promote professional socialization during admission can be expanded to include external stakeholders. In Hagar's (2000) study, students valued the participation of practicing social workers in their admission interviews, citing greater preparation for future practicum and employment interviews. Practitioners can "represent the current demands of practice more authentically than can faculty who are presently not engaged in practice" (Hagar, 2000, p. 285). Practitioner experiences of the interview process can provide useful feedback for faculty on the need to revise admission criteria or curriculum content and strengthen programs' connections and collaborations with the practice community. Practitioners' feedback on student performance at the interviews can be used in future academic advising as admitted students proceed in the social work major.

Additionally, including external stakeholders in the admission process can promote greater diversity by augmenting a faculty whose own diversity is small and potentially developing mentoring relationships between students and social workers from underrepresented groups. By excluding stakeholders, programs may be missing opportunities for input from diverse perspectives. As stakeholder theory suggested, enhancing involvement among stakeholders categorized as subjects (such as field instructors, adjunct faculty, and students in Figure 3) is important to organizational credibility and engagement (Bryson et al., 2011). There will be challenges in expanding external stakeholders' participation in admission, including increased time commitments, scheduling, and logistics. Nonetheless, there would appear to be value in the process for students, social workers, and faculty. Further study on this topic could address admission

more from the perspectives of students, as there are few studies focused on program admission from their perspective or in an alumni role following graduation. Additional research might address other stakeholders who were not represented in this study (see Figure 1). Evaluating the use of admission, and admission interviews in particular, for professional socialization would be informative for educators. Exploration of the connections between admission practices and organizational culture and their impact on implicit curriculum would also be helpful to social work educators.

Conclusion

Much can be learned from stakeholders to help faculty oversee admission to social work programs. According to stakeholders, admission serves highly important functions: gatekeeping candidates for professional suitability, offering students a process of self-reflection and self-selection, reflecting and contributing to educational quality, and progressing students' professional socialization. In this setting, social work admission was faculty-centered with external stakeholder input limited to letters of reference on behalf of applicants. Programs can increase students' professional development opportunities at admission by expanding participation by external stakeholders. This research contributes to educational practice by offering findings to inform faculty as they oversee admission to the social work program. Findings illuminate areas of growth for stakeholder development and connection-building between a social work program and the professional social work community.

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Table 1

Summary of Interviews and Focus Groups

Stakeholder Group	Total Number in Group	Type of Interview	Participants per Interview
Fulltime faculty	2	Group interviews #1 & #2	2
Adjunct faculty	3	Individual interviews	3
Students	17	Focus group #1 (seniors)	6
		Focus group #2 (juniors)	9
		Individual interviews	2
Alumni	7	Individual interviews	7
Field instructors	13	Focus group #1	2
		Focus group #2	3
		Individual interviews	8
Social worker-clients	5	Individual interviews	5
Social service employers	14	Individual interviews	14
University administrators	0	--	0

Note. A total of 45 interviews/focus groups were conducted with 53 participants. Eight respondents met criteria for two separate stakeholder groups and participated in both interview protocols. Recruitment efforts for representatives from university administration were unsuccessful.

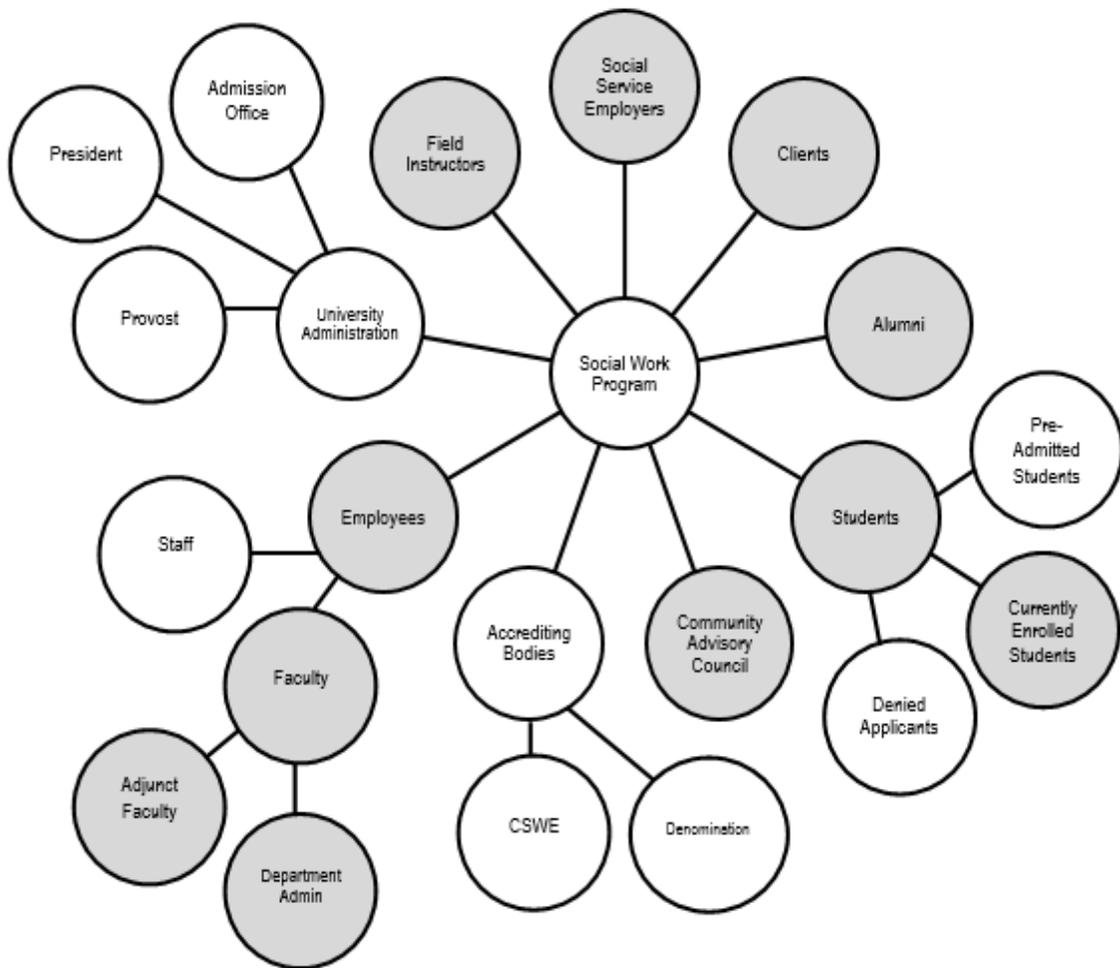


Figure 1. Stakeholder map of baccalaureate social work admission. Groups represented through interviews/focus groups in this study are shaded.



Figure 2. Stakeholder interests in baccalaureate social work admission. All groups comprised of social workers demonstrated a stake in the well-being of clients and the profession.

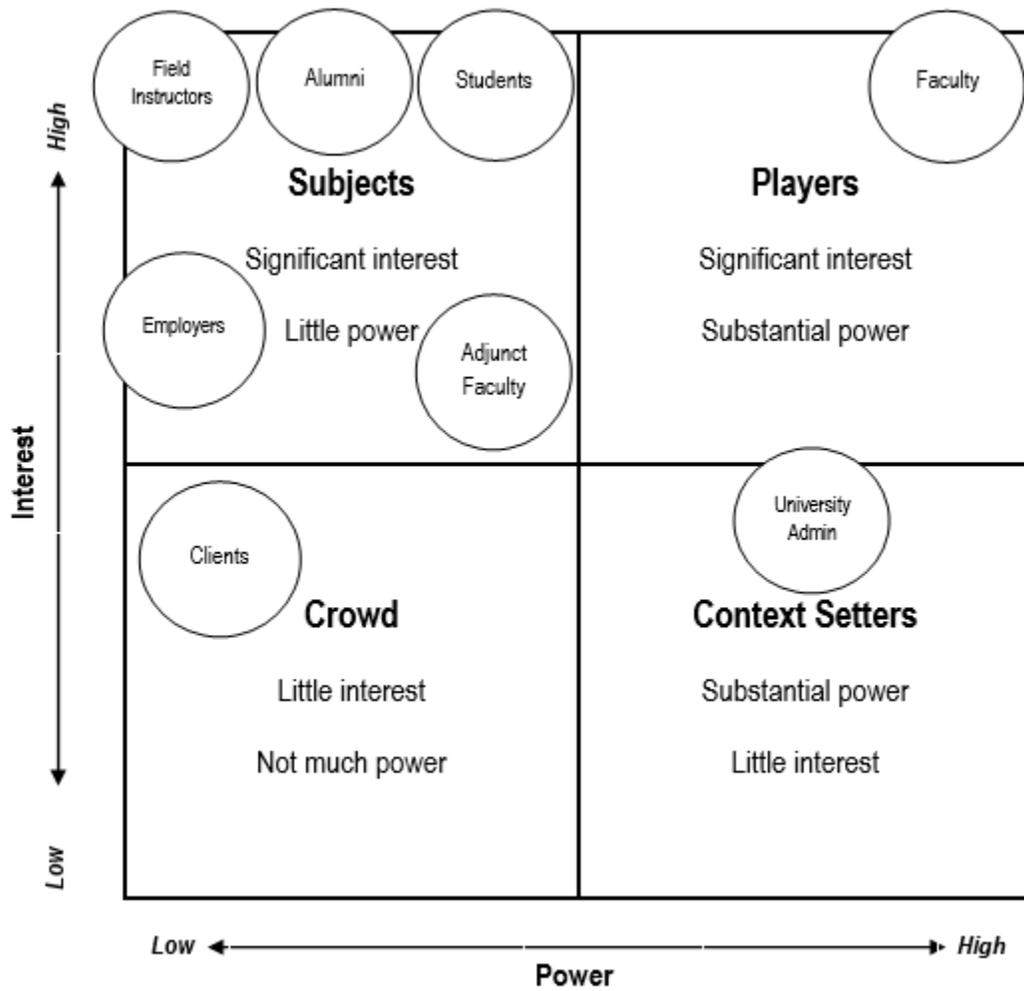


Figure 3. Power versus interest grid for stakeholders of baccalaureate social work admission.

SECTION SIX
SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

Introduction

When I was beginning the doctoral program, several people advised: “Doctoral education is going to change you. When you are finished, you will not be the same person.” As advertised, doctoral studies were a transforming life event. To conclude my dissertation, I will reflect on how doctoral education and the dissertation process have impacted me as a practitioner and a scholar while I also consider some plans for the future. I will discuss how exposure to leadership theory changed me as a leader and administrator, particularly the connection to being a learning leader. Next, I will review how my dissertation project impacted my attitudes as a social work educator towards admission practices. I will conclude by evaluating my research experience and plans for the future as a scholarly practitioner.

Impact as an Educational Leader

Doctoral education has been a transformative experience that pushed me "to explore new knowledge, consider new ideas, and to think a different way" (Catalfamo, 2010, p. 16). Throughout this journey, my personal transformation has included deeper critical reflection, greater awareness of context in my educational practice (Taylor, 2009), and application of new learning to my practice setting (Donaldson, 2009) as I plan and work toward further personal growth and continued professional development. During our studies on leadership theory and practice, I identified strongly with authentic leadership, believing it fits best with my personal leadership philosophy and skills. According to Northouse (2013), authentic leaders analyze organizational needs and circumstances asking two key questions: What is really going on here? What are we going to do about it? This practical approach to authentic leadership focuses on the

reality of the situation with orientation toward organizational assessment and action.

Authentic leadership is driven by purpose (Northouse, 2013). With purpose, authentic leaders are inspired to lead with vision and passion (Northouse, 2013). I believe one of my leadership strengths is guiding a group to discover its purpose and then leading the planning efforts in order to attain and sustain that vision.

Authentic leadership cultivates relationships by developing connectedness and trust with others (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007/2011; Northouse, 2013). Thus, as my career has progressed, it has been gratifying to see my former staff members, licensure supervisees, interns, and students developing their own careers and leading their own teams. Relationships and connections are meaningful, both personally and professionally. I believe my calling is to be a social work educator and leader to help and bring hope to others and to train future social workers to continue that mission (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009).

Bridging both practical and process approaches to authentic leadership are Drucker's (2004/2011) thoughts on what makes an effective executive. Drucker's leadership model is to gain knowledge, and then convert that knowledge into action. In Drucker's model, leaders are disciplined, take responsibility for their decisions, assume responsibility for communication, and facilitate productive meetings. I want to be the authentic, effective leader that Drucker described. Doctoral education has greatly improved my leadership skills in developing purpose and vision and increased my sensitivity to embracing diversity and the ideals of inclusion. Having social work practice experience with a strong team orientation, I was shocked at the individualistic nature of higher education faculty (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). As an educational leader, I

want to continue improving my abilities in establishing relationships, connections, and collaboration among faculty members.

As a clinical social worker, professional ethics has always played an integral role in my practice, mostly as a guide to ethical behaviors in the daily *dos* and *don'ts* of being a professional helper. Throughout the doctoral program, our readings and class discussions on professional ethics have created a deeper personal awareness for me on the importance of ethical leadership and its organizational impact, expanding my conceptualization of professional ethics from guiding one-to-one personal interactions with clients to setting the expectations of organizational culture and conduct as well as social responsibility. To the best of my abilities, I am striving to demonstrate the ethical principles of honesty, dependability, fairness, responsibility, respect, courage, and service (Mihelic, Lipicnik, & Tekavcic, 2010), not just in my micro-level interactions but also in my macro-level obligations as an educational leader.

Reading, thinking, writing, and talking about all curriculum areas--then applying that new knowledge to educational practice--have been life- and career-altering experiences. Transformative learning requires self-awareness, new perspectives, and experiences (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). During my doctoral education, one of the most resonating concepts was becoming a *learning leader* (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). I realize that being a learner is a large part of my personal identity. As a learner, I enjoy discovering new ideas and practices, always striving to grow and improve. I relish the process of collecting new ideas and information, also connected to a love of reading at no surprise. I welcome intellectual discussions, to think about and reflect on ideas through

in-depth conversations, to explore new topics, interpret new information, and process new ideas.

Striving to be a learning leader, I was strongly impacted by the coursework and readings on data-informed decision making. While learning is intrinsically rewarding and valuable, it is the combination of learning and leadership, as a learning leader, that is especially exciting now. Unfamiliar with this concept prior to reading Gill (2010) and Preskill and Brookfield (2009), it has been exciting and affirming to practice learning leadership skills. Specifically, I have promoted organizational learning through data-driven decision making, using data-informed leadership to help impact improvements within my department and program. For example, I purposefully dedicated time for new data-collection projects, such as student outcomes on comprehensive examinations to use in future, data-informed discussions about curriculum, grading standards, and exam policies/procedures. I was also able to employ several tools from our readings such as reflective inquiry exercises, vision-casting activities, and a SWOT analysis assessing program strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Creating a shared vision with my colleagues, we used results to guide our agenda for curriculum, admission, accreditation, teamwork, and leadership. I would be highly complimented that others described me as a learning leader.

Consistent with the purpose of scholarly practitioner research, I chose my dissertation topic because of a problem of practice that I faced in my professional role, namely conducting effective, efficient, and ethical admission in a social work program. Working on the literature review helped me immensely, learning about the topic both as a

practitioner and a scholar. There was solace in knowing that other social work educators also struggle with the issue of admission.

From prior experiences, I had a negative impression of using interviews in the graduate admission process. It turned out that literature supported my concerns. Through the dissertation process, however, I came to discover that admission interviews were highly valued by stakeholders in social work education, from field instructors, employers, and adjunct faculty to students and alumni. For social workers in the field, they reflected on their admission interviews as an important professional socialization process. For the current students represented in my study, they saw its omission from their admission process as a missing component in their student and professional development. So, I have come to conclude that the utility of admission interviews is not so much a predictive mechanism of students' future success (although it can be an indicator of poor social skills that a paper-only process can overlook). Rather, the utility of admission interviews is symbolic in nature. Admission interviews can facilitate professional socialization if done well, and social work programs should probably include them in their admission processes as a rite of passage. As an administrator who likes an organization to operate purposefully, effectively and efficiently, it is a little difficult for me to promote the practice of admission interviews, which are enormously time- and labor-intensive. The dissertation process has reminded me that symbolic gestures and activities are worth the investment of time and effort. Admission interviews are symbolically valuable—for students, faculty, and the program.

Impact as a Scholar

As a social work administrator, I was familiar with program evaluations through my master's program and having participated in evaluations for numerous grant projects. Now, as a scholarly practitioner, my interest in utilization-focused evaluations to guide organizational learning has deepened. I have found program evaluation tools to be extremely helpful in my work as an educational leader and plan to continue using utilization-focused evaluation in my own educational practice as well as in future scholarly practitioner endeavors. For me, the incorporation of a utilization-focus in my dissertation project was one of its most exciting aspects, one that I have already shared with my colleagues as we make decisions within the department.

During my dissertation, I discovered that I highly enjoy qualitative research. I liked traveling about and conducting interviews with participants in their own offices and professional settings. I liked hearing their stories and perspectives about social work education. I particularly enjoyed the techniques of member checking and memoing. Through member checking, I got to throw out my initial impressions, hunches, and ideas into interviews and seek people's responses. I liked the feedback and new conversations that member checking initiated. I believe this connects to my earlier discussion about learning and being a learning leader. I also found memoing to be profoundly helpful for processing my reactions to and ideas about the research process as it was unfolding. Data collection and analysis are truly concurrent processes in qualitative research, and memoing was a powerful agent for facilitating my immersion in the data and developing my ideas during the project.

In addition, I have also enjoyed the writing process for my dissertation, from the literature review to the findings especially. I have enjoyed the creative process with its focus on words and themes and symbols, features particularly inherent to qualitative research strategies that likely explain my affinity for qualitative methodology. I feel as though I may be shifting from the role of listening to clients' stories as a social worker to one of now telling those stories as a researcher. It would undoubtedly be interesting and challenging to pursue more research and professional writing opportunities.

Having worked the past seven years as a clinical instructor of social work, my professional focus has been clinical education. For years now, I have said that I do not want to be a "research professor," that my professional desire is to be a teacher, to teach students *how* to be social workers. Through the dissertation process, I have discovered that I would like to continue pursuing a modest research agenda. I have that opportunity with employment at a university with a teaching focus that also supports scholarly endeavors. The tasks now are to incorporate research and writing time into my work schedule and routine and to seek ongoing mentorship to maintain some momentum from the dissertation process.

I have found my dissertation to be an edifying project, one that has helped me grow as a social work educator, administrator, and rookie researcher. It was very insightful to interview and, more importantly, to *listen* to stakeholders in the system of social work education. It is this lesson of listening that I hope to continue practicing throughout my life and career.

Conclusion

As a transformative learning experience, doctoral education has helped me become a better thinker, reader, writer, and talker (Bruffee, 1999; Taylor, 2009). A doctoral program for scholarly practitioners has helped me become both a better learner and administrator through the study of leadership, organizational and policy analysis, and learning theory. Because this program inspires and encourages immediate application of new leadership principles and skills (Donaldson, 2009), I found myself reflecting deeply as a student/scholar and practitioner in my work settings. I appreciate the many opportunities doctoral studies have provided. Embarking upon a new chapter, as I conclude my dissertation, I am hopeful as I dream new dreams and set new goals both personal and professional.

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Appendix A

Questioning Route for Interview/Focus Group

Stakeholder Group: *Social Work Faculty & Program Administrators Interview #1*

- Opening: 1. Tell me a little about yourself and how long you have been a social work educator and program administrator.
- Introductory: 2. How are you involved in social work admission procedures?
- Transition: 3. Selective admission is defined as the assessment of candidates' academic potential and personal characteristics for the practice of social work. Should social work programs have selective or open admission?
- Key Questions: 4. What qualities should selective admission screen for in social work candidates?
5. Can anyone, with enough training and education, be a good social worker? If not, how should social work programs select suitable candidates for social work programs?
6. Think back to times that you have overseen admission. Do you have any regrets about admission decision making? Describe those experiences.
7. How do you know when social work admission practices are/are not working well?
8. For the purpose of overseeing admission, who should social work faculty consider as their clients?
9. What do you like/dislike about your involvement with social work admission?
- Ending Question: 10. I want to understand more about admission practices in social work programs. Is there anything that I missed?

Questioning Route for Interview/Focus Group

Stakeholder Group: *Social Work Faculty & Program Administrators Interview #2*

- Opening: 1. We are continuing our discussion about admission practices in social work programs. Is there anything you wish to add from our last discussion before we begin?
- Introductory: 2. What are the current priorities of the social work program's admission process?
- Transition: 3. Identify what the future priorities of social work admission practices should be.
- Key Questions: 4. Describe the process in which you develop your admission process and selection criteria for admission to the social work program.
5. What factors impact successful implementation of social work admission processes?
6. What groups/interests have been represented in the social work admission process at FBU?
7. Do you include other groups/interests in the admission process at FBU? Explain.
8. What factors impact a social work program's credibility and reputation regarding admission?
- Ending Question: 9. I want to understand more about admission practices in social work programs. Is there anything that I missed?

Questioning Route for Interview/Focus Group
Stakeholder Group: *Field Instructors*

- Opening: 1. Tell me a little about yourself and your connection to the social work program at FBU.
- Introductory: 2. What do you know about social work admission practices at FBU?
- Transition: 3. Selective admission is defined as the assessment of candidates' academic potential and personal characteristics for the practice of social work. Should social work programs have selective or open admission?
- Key Questions: 4. What qualities should selective admission screen for in social work candidates?
5. Think back to your two most challenging social work practicum students. Write down traits/phrases that were the causes of concern. In your estimation, how could the social work program have addressed or screened for these problems at admission?
6. Can anyone, with enough training and education, be a good social worker? If not, how should social work programs select suitable candidates for social work programs?
7. What factors impact a social work program's credibility and reputation regarding admission?
8. What groups/interests should be represented in the social work admission process at FBU?
9. How are field instructors impacted by social work admission practices at FBU?
10. From a field instructor's perspective, what do social work educators need to know to improve social work admission practices?
11. What is your interest in serving on an admission selection committee?
- Ending Question: 12. I want to understand more about admission practices in social work programs. Is there anything that I missed?

Questioning Route for Interview/Focus Group
Stakeholder Group: *Social Services Employers*

- Opening: 1. Tell me a little about yourself and your connection to the social work program at FBU.
- Introductory: 2. What do you know about social work admission practices at FBU?
- Transition: 3. Selective admission is defined as the assessment of candidates' academic potential and personal characteristics for the practice of social work. Should social work programs have selective or open admission?
- Key Questions: 4. What qualities should selective admission screen for in social work candidates?
5. Can anyone, with enough training and education, be a good social worker? If not, how should social work programs select suitable candidates for social work programs?
6. Looking back on your work as an administrator, can you describe any failures in the social work admission process that you have observed?
7. What factors impact a social work program's credibility and reputation regarding admission?
8. What groups/interests should be represented in the social work admission process at FBU?
9. How are employers impacted by social work admission practices at FBU?
10. From an employer's perspective, what do social work educators need to know to improve social work admission practices?
11. What is your interest in serving on an admission selection committee?
- Ending Question: 12. I want to understand more about admission practices in social work programs. Is there anything that I missed?

Questioning Route for Interview/Focus Group
Stakeholder Group: *Social Work Practitioners-Former Clients*

- Opening: 1. Tell me a little about yourself and how you became a social worker.
- Introductory: 2. What do you know about social work admission practices at FBU?
- Transition: 3. Selective admission is defined as the assessment of candidates' academic potential and personal characteristics for the practice of social work. Should social work programs have selective or open admission?
- Key Questions: 4. What qualities should selective admission screen for in social work candidates?
5. Can anyone, with enough training and education, be a good social worker? If not, how should social work programs select suitable candidates for social work programs?
6. Looking back on your social work studies and career, can you describe any failures in the social work admission process that you have observed?
7. What factors impact a social work program's credibility and reputation regarding admission?
8. What groups/interests should be represented in the social work admission process at FBU?
9. How are clients impacted by social work admission practices at FBU?
10. From a client's perspective, what do social work educators need to know to improve social work admission practices?
11. What is your interest in serving on an admission selection committee?
- Ending Question: 12. I want to understand more about admission practices in social work programs. Is there anything that I missed?

Questioning Route for Interview/Focus Group
Stakeholder Group: *Students*

- Opening: 1. Tell me a little about yourself and your connection to the social work program at FBU.
- Introductory: 2. Describe your experiences with the social work admission process at FBU.
- Transition: 3. Selective admission is defined as the assessment of candidates' academic potential and personal characteristics for the practice of social work. Should social work programs have selective or open admission?
- Key Questions: 4. What qualities should selective admission screen for in social work candidates?
5. Can anyone, with enough training and education, be a good social worker? If not, how should social work programs select suitable candidates for social work programs?
6. During your social work studies, can you describe any failures in the social work admission process that you have observed?
7. What factors impact a social work program's credibility and reputation regarding admission?
8. What groups/interests should be represented in the social work admission process at FBU?
9. How are students impacted by social work admission practices at FBU?
10. From a student's perspective, what do social work educators need to know to improve social work admission practices?
11. What is your interest in serving on an admission selection committee?
- Ending Question: 12. I want to understand more about admission practices in social work programs. Is there anything that I missed?

Questioning Route for Interview/Focus Group
Stakeholder Group: *University Administrators*

- Opening: 1. Tell me about your role in the university and your connection to the social work program at FBU.
- Introductory: 2. What do you know about social work admission practices at FBU?
- Transition: 3. Selective admission is defined as the assessment of candidates' academic potential and personal characteristics for the practice of social work. Should social work programs have selective or open admission?
- Key Questions: 4. What qualities should selective admission screen for in social work candidates?
5. What are the current priorities of the social work program's admission process?
6. What should be future priorities of social work admission practices at FBU?
7. What factors impact a social work program's credibility and reputation regarding admission?
8. What groups/interests should be represented in the social work admission process at FBU?
9. How are university administrators impacted by social work admission practices at FBU?
10. From a university administrator's perspective, what do social work educators need to know to improve social work admission practices?
- Ending Question: 11. I want to understand more about admission practices in social work programs. Is there anything that I missed?

Appendix B

Consent to Participate in Interview/Focus Group

I am asking you to participate in a research study titled “A Stakeholder Analysis of Admission in a Baccalaureate Social Work Program.” I will describe this study and answer your questions.

What is the purpose of this project?

The purpose of this research is to learn more about admission in social work programs.

What will I do?

I will ask you to participate in an interview and/or focus group. I will ask questions about admission and gatekeeping practices in social work programs. The interview/focus group will take approximately 1 hour to 90 minutes.

Are there any benefits or risks to participating in this project?

I do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. There are no direct benefits to the participant. I hope to learn more about social work education to develop better practices to benefit future students, clients, and the profession.

Am I required to participate? Will I be compensated?

Participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty or effect on your relationship with the university, researcher, or other organization involved with the research. In addition, you may skip any question during the interview or focus group, but continue in the rest of the study. You may withdraw by informing the researcher that you no longer wish to participate. There is no payment or compensation for participation.

How is my confidentiality maintained?

Individual information you share will remain confidential. Responses from participants will be combined and will not have names or other identifiable information attached to it. Signed consent forms will be separated from the interview data, and the two will not be connected. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. Interview recordings will be transcribed and destroyed after 7 years. We may also communicate by email. Please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though I am taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent through email could be read by a third party.

Who do I contact with questions about this project?

The main researcher conducting this study is Lisa Street, a doctoral student at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Lisa Street at las6p5@mail.missouri.edu or at 417-988-0210. The Faculty Advisor for this study is Dr. Jeffrey Cornelius-White, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, University of Missouri-Columbia.

A Stakeholder Analysis of Admission in a Baccalaureate Social Work Program
Consent to Participate in Interview/Focus Group

Statement of Consent

I have been informed of the nature and purpose of this research. I consent to participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

Consent for Audio Recording

I will audio record the interviews to allow me to focus on our conversation. Recordings will be transcribed and then destroyed after 7 years. With your permission below, excerpts from the interview/focus group may be included in research documents or other future publications.

Please sign below if you are willing to have this interview audio recorded.

- I do not want to have this interview recorded.
- I am willing to have this interview recorded.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Participants should keep page 1 for future reference.

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for 7 years beyond the end of the study.

VITA

Lisa A. Street earned a bachelor of social work *summa cum laude* and a master of social work with a clinical concentration working with families and children from the University of Missouri-Columbia. She has been a Licensed Clinical Social Worker since 1999. Her practice experience includes medical social work in an emergency center and long-term physical rehabilitation for traumatic brain injuries, adoptions, juvenile justice, drug courts, and social work administration. She was a Clinical Assistant Professor with the Social Work Program at Missouri State University for seven years, holding administrative appointments as the Field Education Coordinator and MSW Program Coordinator before joining the Behavioral Sciences Department at Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri.