

Improving the Research Climate in Social Work Curricula: Clarifying Learning Expectations Across BSW and MSW Research Courses

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ABSTRACT. Research courses are associated with performance anxiety and educational insecurity for many social work students. This paper makes the case that student anxiety associated with research courses is rooted in the history of the social work profession, and this history sheds light on the present day climate of research in social work education. The authors suggest that improvement to the research climate in social work education requires an “institutional” response. To that end, this paper describes a committee process that resulted in changes to one school’s curriculum policy by revamping student learning objectives for a sequence of five research courses that spanned BSW and MSW programs. The committee produced a continuum of student learning expectations based on Bloom’s taxonomy, which represents a logical progression of

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knowledge and skill competencies as students advance through their course work. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Research is the curricular content area that evokes the greatest amount of anxiety and the least sense of confidence among social work students. Being aware of students' aversion to learning about research, social work faculty often struggle with how much research instruction is enough, particularly since most students are studying to be practitioners and not researchers. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it briefly chronicles the history of research in the social work profession to provide a context for understanding the present-day climate of research in social work education. Second, it describes a committee process in which student learning expectations in bachelor's- and master's-level research curricula were revamped to reflect a single continuum of learning. Additionally, implications of articulating expectations of student learning across BSW and MSW research courses are discussed.

AN HISTORICAL LOOK AT RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

The turbulent relationship between research and practice is well documented in the social work literature. Examining the history of how research entered, grew, and eventually gained "core" status in the profession sheds light on the research climate in social work education today. An historical perspective offers a thread through time that facilitates understanding of present-day attitudes (Finn and Jacobson, 2003). The mood in social work education today seems to be one in which students and faculty dread research courses (Epstein, 1987; Epstein, 1996; Green et al., 2001; Wainstock, 1994).

Since the very inception of the profession, social work has struggled with the integration of research into both educational curricula and practice. The roots for a profession based on a foundation of research were established with the first school of social work. The current University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration was

founded in 1903 as the Chicago Institute of Social Science. Four years later in 1907 a Department of Research was added through funding from a Russell Sage Foundation grant (Thyer, 1996). Despite this beginning, the nascent profession of social work was placed on the defensive in 1915 with critical commentary by Porter Lee and Abraham Flexner at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections. Porter Lee stated, "No organized activity can claim professional standing until it rests upon scientific knowledge and has developed definite methods to reach its goal" (Lee, 1915, p. 599). Abraham Flexner's appraisal was that social work did not merit the status of a profession based on criteria that included the lack of a social work body of literature based on scientific data (Flexner, 1915).

Social work responded to these critiques with fervor to establish a profession that was built on a scientific foundation. Two years after Flexner's challenge, Mary Richmond produced the first social work practice text, *Social Diagnosis*. Richmond champions the scientific method as coming to the rescue. Indeed, she states: "The new scientific management engineers are coming to our rescue, for they teach us that processes must be developed by observation and experiment" (Richmond, 1917, p. 315). This seminal writing accepted Flexner's challenge and brought the problems of fitting research with social work practice into the bosom of the profession.

As social work became more established as a profession, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) was born. NASW supported research in its bylaws by stating that one of the three purposes of social work is "to further the broad objective of improving conditions of life in our democratic society through utilization of the professional knowledge and skills of social work, and to expand through research the knowledge necessary to define and attain these goals" (NASW, 1955, p. 3). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) also has actively promoted the importance of research as an essential skill for effective practice with several references to research as a core part of the curriculum. The message of these two national organizations echoes Flexner's authoritative stance; that is, research is an essential ingredient for defining social work as a profession.

While there have been many efforts to build research into social work since 1915, the profession continues to struggle with empirical methods of knowledge building. The struggle is most exposed around the issue of integrating research and practice at the practitioner level. The literature is replete with articles promoting the integration of researcher and

practitioner as well as articles discussing the angst associated with trying to merge these two roles (Crane, 1978; Epstein, I., 1996; Epstein, L., 1996; Fraser et al., 1991; Meyer, 1996; Penka and Kirk, 1991; Rosen, 1996; Rubin et al., 1992; Wakefield and Kirk, 1996; Witkin, 1996). Recent developments in methodology, such as single subject design and rapid assessment instruments, have attempted to bridge the research-practice gap by providing tangible research tools for practitioner use (Thyer, 1996).

Research Usage in Social Work

Despite emphasis from professional organizations and available empirical tools to facilitate research use, social work students and practitioners remain reluctant to embrace research in practice; they seem to approach research with trepidation at best and absolute aversion at worst. It appears the defensive posture taken in response to Flexner's comments made nearly a century ago exists at some level today when the research and practice are considered as a pair.

Social workers have been slow to fully embrace the integration of research and practice. Fraser and colleagues (1991) reviewed the professional social work literature to examine the extent that social workers publish empirical articles. They reviewed the top 10 journals recommended by a NIMH-funded Task Force on Social Work Research and discovered that 29% of articles authored by social workers were empirically based, compared to 82% of articles authored by individuals outside of the profession.

Although social workers participate in evaluation of practice, most do so at the least sophisticated levels of research. A survey by Marino, Green, and Young (1998) noted that 56% of their sample of practicing social workers reported having engaged in at least one of four research designs (i.e., survey, qualitative, single subject, quasi-experimental, or experimental designs) in their practice. The most common was survey design used for purposes of conducting needs assessments or evaluating client satisfaction. Fewer social workers participated in qualitative studies (26%) or single-subject designed studies (23%). Only 14% of social workers engaged in some form of pre-experimental or quasi-experimental design with a one group pretest-posttest design being the most common. Bivariate and multivariate statistics were performed rarely, with 9% and 2% of the sample, respectively, reporting such activity.

While social workers do not routinely use research in practice, they appear to report high levels of confidence in performing research tasks.

In a survey by Penka and Kirk (1991) social workers self-rated nine general and four quantitative clinical evaluation skills in terms of their skill level and how often each skill was used with clients. The percent of workers rating themselves as very skilled or skilled on the general evaluation tasks ranged from 77.9% (i.e., “describe intervention techniques”) to 92.4% (i.e., “operationalize target problems”) but use of these skills with clients averaged 52.8% and 86.5%, respectively. The percent of workers rating themselves as very skilled or skilled on the quantitative evaluation tasks ranged from 27.2% (i.e., “use statistical techniques to evaluate change”) to 46.4% (i.e., “use standardized questionnaires”), but use of these skills with clients averaged 10.2% and 19.3%, respectively (Penka and Kirk, 1991, p. 515). These survey results show social workers reporting confidence with research skills that were not routinely performed in practice. A professional “culture” where impressions (or expectations) of performance exceed ability fuels the unfortunate climate of defensiveness that is steeped in the profession’s history.

Current Research Climate in Social Work Education

Social work educators with the responsibility for teaching research courses frequently encounter students who lack motivation, preparation, and enthusiasm to acquire research knowledge and skills (Bogal and Singer, 1981; Epstein, 1987; Forte, 1995; Grasso and Epstein, 1992). To quote Epstein (1987), “No other part of the curriculum has been so consistently received by students with as much groaning, moaning, eye-rolling, hyperventilation, and waiver strategizing as the research course” (p. 71). Student aversion to research is more intense in social work than other disciplines. For example, social work students report significantly higher levels of research anxiety and significantly less interest in research than students in other majors such as psychology and business (Green et al., 2001; Royse and Rompf, 1992).

It seems that social work students (and faculty) remain in a position to accept on authority that research is good for them and, hence, good for practice. Internal to the profession, organizations such as NASW and CSWE emphatically encourage the pursuit of practice based on research. Externally, regulatory bodies, funding sources, and managed care organizations expect social work practice to be evaluated for effectiveness using sound empirical methods. Yet there is little evidence that social workers are either conducting or utilizing research in practice. Social work educators continue to struggle with the challenges of get-

ting students to accept and utilize research as a component of practice, which means that new professionals are not likely to be taking integrated practice frameworks into the field. Given the history of how research emerged in the social work profession, it may be that student anxiety is not something carried into social work education with each new cohort of students but rather is a reflection of the profession's deep-rooted climate of research resistance. And changing a professional or organizational climate requires an institutional-level response.

It is the assumption and assertion of these authors that an institutional-level response must be "grown from within" by how we shape social work students' thinking about research and practice. This may need a significant reevaluation of how social work faculty teach research. The literature is replete with critique regarding the lack of research integration into practice (Epstein, 1996; Grasso and Epstein, 1992; Marino et al., 1998). Perhaps the reverse criticism, the lack of practice wisdom used to teach research, could be entertained. If learning about research has previously been met with aversion, perhaps this resistance is the result of pedagogical methods that overlooked the basic social work principle of "starting where the client is." Rather than meet resistance with force, research teachers would gain much more by joining with the students' resistance, validating their anxiety, and then through a process of systematic desensitization gradually building their knowledge, confidence, and appreciation for research. It is our assumption that a sound and well-articulated model for laying out student learning expectations related to research could be the catalyst for the "institutional-level response" necessary to instill an integration of research and practice by producing social workers who equally embrace the value of both.

ESTABLISHING STUDENT LEARNING EXPECTATIONS IN THE SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH CURRICULUM

In this section of the paper, we describe a committee process that aimed to build research curriculum policy to promote a positive climate for learning research in one Midwest school of social work. The goal was to clarify expectations for student learning in all social work research courses offered within the school so as to lessen the anxiety associated with these courses. The committee process took place in a school of social work that had a 25-year history of offering only undergraduate social work education before starting an MSW program in 2000. The

development of the MSW program generated discussion among faculty about expectations of student learning in BSW courses relative to master's-level study. Several questions emerged among faculty during this period of program expansion. Questions specific to the research curriculum included: Where do research expectations end for BSW students and begin for MSW students? What level of research knowledge and skill is required to achieve proficiency as a social work practitioner with a BSW versus a MSW degree?

A curriculum committee, reporting to the faculty as a whole, governed all curriculum development within the school. The curriculum committee served an oversight and coordinating function for five subcommittees that were each defined by one core curriculum area—practice, policy, human behavior and the social environment, field, and research (CSWE, 2002). The curriculum committee, cochaired by the school's BSW and MSW program directors, was comprised of the five subcommittee chairs and two student advisors (one BSW and one MSW); however, meetings were open to all faculty members.

Each curriculum subcommittee (known as sequence committees) consisted of two to three faculty (one of whom was chair) and at least one BSW and one MSW student representative. The composition of the research sequence committee was two faculty, one MSW student, and two BSW students. Additionally, the BSW program director was an active ex-officio participant. Sequence committees were charged with responsibility for ensuring the logical progression of content and learning objectives across courses in their curricular domain. The research sequence committee was specifically concerned with five courses: two BSW and three MSW (one foundation and two concentration).

The process of redeveloping the research curriculum and content was directed by the following principles or guidelines.

- The process would include the principle of shared governance that was characteristic of decision making in the school (School of Social Work, 2002).
- The process would culminate with a common, well-articulated view of learning expectations without infringement upon academic freedom.
- Sequence members were urged to “think outside the box” and essentially be willing to start from scratch with development of course objectives.
- In order for the work of the sequence to move rapidly and avoid stagnation, the chair disseminated “homework” to be completed

prior to meetings so the time in the meeting could be used to make decisions and move forward.

The work and accomplishments of the committee are described in six major steps that, in hindsight, were thought to accurately portray the evolving committee process and resultant product: (1) defining the committee task, (2) identifying research competencies, (3) incorporating Bloom's taxonomy, (4) surveying constituents, (5) using survey data to inform committee decisions, and (6) creating a continuum of learning expectations across the five courses in the research sequence.

Defining the Committee Task

The charge given to the research committee by the curriculum committee was to streamline learning objectives across the five research courses so that expectations of knowledge and skill advancement for each course in the sequence could be plainly understood. The committee tackled five sets of objectives (one set for each research course) that were all created at different times, by different people, and with varying degrees of consideration to other courses in the sequence. When the objectives for all five courses were examined together, however, it became clear that the school's research sequence suffered from both discontinuity between courses and duplication across courses; two conditions that were believed to have negative influence on the research climate within the school.

The committee operated on the assumption that articulating written expectations of student learning would facilitate a positive research climate within the school. A time frame of one academic year was set to accomplish the task, which involved six monthly one-hour meetings spread out evenly throughout the fall and winter semesters. The work was accomplished in a context where all committee members had other, often more pressing, demands on their time. The process described in this paper is one that evolved over time and was shaped by committee discussion.

Generating a List of Research Competencies

At the second meeting, the committee examined a comprehensive list of research competencies generated by the chair after she examined several documents immediately available to her. These materials included existing syllabi, school documents (e.g., meeting minutes, accreditation

documents), premier research textbooks (e.g., Grinnell, 2001; Rubin and Babbie, 2001), the CSWE Curriculum Policy Statement (2002), the NASW Code of Ethics (1999), and a recent writing from Holden and colleagues (1999) who developed the *Research Self-Efficacy Scale* as a tool for assessing educational outcomes for social work research courses. The committee then discussed and edited the list of core competencies, settling on 35 items (Figure 1) that were thought to comprehensively capture the range of research knowledge and skill expected of students graduating with BSW to MSW degrees.

Incorporating Bloom's Taxonomy to Measure Learning Expectation

The committee also sought to evaluate each competency item in terms of where in the sequence of research courses it should be taught and to what level of proficiency. The list of 35 core competencies evolved into the survey instrument presented in Figure 1 when Bloom's taxonomy was used to create a response scale to rate each item. Bloom's taxonomy is a hierarchy of educational objectives that divide cognitive learning expectations into six categories that range from simple to complex (Bloom, 1956). The first and simplest level is *knowledge*, which is primarily about remembering or recalling previously learning material. The second level, *comprehension*, focuses on the ability to grasp meaning of material. The third level, *application*, addresses the ability to use learned information in new and real situations. The fourth level, *analysis*, captures the ability to understand organizational structure of material by breaking it down into its component parts. The fifth level, *synthesis*, is the ability to put parts together to form a new whole. Finally, *evaluation* is concerned with the ability to judge the value of material based on clearly defined criteria. Bloom's taxonomy was used because it is highly adaptable to individual programs, it has wide and long-standing application for setting educational goals, and its classification system is simple to interpret. As can be seen in Figure 1, the taxonomy accounts for six values of the 7-point category partition scale used. A "not applicable" response value was added to allow respondents to indicate that a particular competency item was not an appropriate learning expectation for social work students. The survey's 7-point scale was anchored with symbolic text (versus numerical values) in effort to have respondents give more thought to the qualitative differences between all levels of the taxonomy when rating each item.

FIGURE 1. Elements of the Research Sequence Committee Survey Instrument

Core Research Competencies	Bloom's Taxonomy Rating Scale*						
	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
1. Science as a method for building social work practice	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
2. Research in the social work profession	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
3. Types of research approaches	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
4. Types of evaluation approaches	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
5. Review literature—a particular area of social science theory and research	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
6. Research questions and hypotheses	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
7. Group-level research design	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
8. Case-level research design	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
9. Sampling	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	
10. Measurement—defining variables	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
11. Measurement—reliability and validity	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
12. Data collection methods	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
13. Data analysis—qualitative	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
14. Data analysis—quantitative (statistics)	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
15. Interpret research findings	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
16. Written research reports	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
17. Oral research reports	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
18. Critical thinking	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
19. Electronic/library literature searches	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
20. Computer software for quantitative data analysis	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
21. Computer software for qualitative data analysis	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
22. Computer software for presenting research results (e.g., graphs, charts, tables)	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
23. Critique published theory	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
24. Critique published research studies	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
25. Systematic self-evaluation of social work practice	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
26. Partake in research being conducted in practice- and agency-based settings?	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
27. Evidence-based decision making	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
28. Integrating research into practice	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
29. Diversity issues and research	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
30. Policy issues and research	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
31. Social justice issues and research	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
32. Practice issues and research	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
33. Ethical issues and research	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
34. Populations-at-risk and research	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E
35. Professional issues and research	N/A	K	C	App	Ana	S	E

*N/A = Not Applicable, K = Knowledge, C = Comprehension, App = Application, Ana = Analysis, S = Synthesis, E = Evaluation

Note: **Bold** values indicate level of learning expectation for the graduating BSW student

Surveying Constituents

At the next juncture, the committee used the survey to gather input from various constituency groups including research faculty, students, field instructors, and other professional social workers who performed research in their jobs. By the third meeting, the committee had 26 anonymously completed surveys from a purposive sample comprised of 14 researchers (social work faculty and other social work professionals), eight graduate students (the inaugural full-time MSW cohort), and four field instructors.

The survey that went out to respondents was accompanied with instructions, plus two samples of Bloom's taxonomy used by educators at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and the University of Victoria, Canada, to develop student assessment tools; both were retrieved from the Internet.¹ Respondents were instructed to become familiar with the six levels of the taxonomy before rating any of the core research competencies. To focus the survey task, respondents were also instructed to rate expectations of student learning for an undergraduate student at the endpoint of their BSW education. The "graduating" BSW student was selected as the anchor for rating survey items because it was the point-in-time at which both BSW and MSW student representatives on the committee could meaningfully relate.

Utilizing Survey Data to Inform Committee Decisions

The sole purpose of collecting the survey data was to inform committee discussion. The median was used as the summary statistic to focus discussion, but attention was also given to the range of responses for each item. By the end of the third meeting, three different levels of learning expectations were identified for the graduating BSW student. Specifically, three competency items (i.e., 20 to 22, see Figure 1) fell into the knowledge level of expectation, 22 competency items (2-8, 13-17, 23-25, 27-28, 30-32, 34-35) fell into the comprehension level, and the remaining 10 competencies (1, 9-12, 18-19, 26, 29, 33) fell into the application level. The level of expectation for the graduating BSW student is shown in Figure 1 by bolded response values for each competency item.

Setting cognitive learning expectations for each of the 35 competencies offered a new level of clarity regarding what BSW students were expected to achieve. For example, it was possible for the committee to suggest that BSW graduates need only *know* (i.e., remember, recall) ma-

terial related to computer software use (items 20-22) but be able to *apply* (i.e., use learned material in new situations) sampling concepts (item 9) to social work practice scenarios. Additionally, the survey data facilitated a consensus that BSW students would only be expected to maximally achieve research learning up to the level of application to qualify for graduation. Learning beyond the level of application was reserved for graduate-level study.

Creating a Continuum of Learning Expectations Across BSW and MSW Research Courses

The final step of the Committee's work was carried out over the three committee meetings of the winter semester and involved two major tasks. The first was to compose definitional statements of learning expectation for each level of Bloom's taxonomy that were specific to social work students. Displayed in Figure 2, these definitions describe what is expected of students for each level of the taxonomy. While the

FIGURE 2. Cumulative Levels of Learning Expectations Across Courses in the Research Sequence Curriculum

Levels of Cognitive Learning Expectations ¹	Research Courses				
	BSW		MSW		
<i>Knowledge</i> : the ability to remember to mind appropriate research knowledge and skill.	Course 1	Course 2	Foundation	Concentration 1	Concentration 2
<i>Comprehension</i> : the ability to grasp the meaning of research knowledge and skill.					
<i>Application</i> : the ability learned research knowledge and skill to social work practice scenarios.					
<i>Analysis</i> : the ability to break down research content (knowledge and skill) into its component parts and understand their function in terms of improving social work practice.					
<i>Synthesis</i> : the ability to put together various aspects of research knowledge and skill to form a new whole (e.g., research proposal, evaluation plan) in a manner that emphasizes creativity and reflects innovative ways of integrating research in social work practice.					
<i>Evaluation</i> : the ability to judge the value of research for a given purpose based on sound criteria.					

¹Adapted from Bloom, B. S. (Ed.) (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals: Handbook I, cognitive domain*. New York: Mckay

separations between categories are not absolute, the implication is that lower levels must be achieved before moving to higher levels.

The second task in the final step of the committee's work was to use the taxonomy to build a progressive level of student learning expectations across all five courses in the sequence, starting with the first BSW research course and ending with the last MSW course. This continuum of learning expectations is illustrated in Figure 2 by the five bars representing the five courses in sequence. Each bar extends to the highest level of expectation for that particular course. As discussed earlier, the level of learning expectations within one course can vary depending on specific competencies. The survey data discussed earlier were anchored at "Course 2" of the BSW program (Figure 2), which represents the endpoint of the BSW research curriculum, or the graduating BSW student. Consequently, Course 2 became the metaphorical fulcrum for committee discussion about weighing the expectations of other courses.

A decision was made to create a continuum of learning expectations for courses in the research sequence by "subtracting" one level of the taxonomy to each competency item for Course 1 and "adding" one level of the taxonomy to the first concentration course in the MSW program and two levels to the second concentration course. Since the foundation MSW course theoretically aims to bring graduate students without a BSW degree to the level of BSW graduates, the expectations of this course were set on par with the second BSW course (i.e., Course 2) or at the point where BSW graduates theoretically should be. The first MSW concentration course begins where undergraduate expectations leave off.

The committee concluded its work on this project by simmering the 35 competencies into a manageable number of course objectives that would pertain to all five courses in the research sequence. Figure 3 displays 17 course objectives for the second course in the BSW program. The italicized words in Figure 3 indicate the level of learning expectation (according to the taxonomy in Figure 2) for this course but would be adjusted downward for the first BSW course, and upward for the two MSW concentration courses. For example, students who complete Course 1 in the BSW program should be expected to *comprehend* or be able to grasp the meaning of sampling method and processes. However, students completing the Concentration 1 Course at the MSW level should be able to implement sampling methods and processes at the level of *analysis*, or have the ability to break down sampling methods into component parts and to understand their function in terms of the entire research process. Students completing the second concentration research course in the

FIGURE 3. Student Learning Expectation for BSW Research Course 2 Objectives

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1. *Apply* science as a method for building social work practice.
 2. *Comprehend* the types of research and evaluation approaches used to build the social work knowledge base.
 3. *Comprehend* how to locate research and theoretical literature that informs social work practice.
 4. *Comprehend* the elements and purposes of research questions and hypotheses.
 5. *Comprehend* how research designs (case-level and group-level) are used to answer specific questions about social work policy and practice.
 6. *Apply* sampling in research and evaluation processes.
 7. *Apply* validity and reliability for measuring demographic, intervention, and outcome variables.
 8. *Apply* the variety of data collection methods and procedures used in social work research.
 9. *Comprehend* the basics of qualitative and quantitative data analyses.
 10. *Comprehend* the elements of research and evaluation reports.
 11. *Apply* research knowledge and skill for critical thinking.
 12. *Know* about qualitative and quantitative software used for data analysis and presentation of findings.
 13. *Comprehend* how to critique published research.
 14. *Comprehend* how research is used to build an evidence-based practice framework.
 15. *Apply* research as carried out by social workers in practice and program settings.
 16. *Apply* diversity and ethical issues in social work research.
 17. *Comprehend* how issues of policy, social justice, populations-at-risk, practice, and the social work profession interplay with research and evaluation processes.
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MSW program should be able to *synthesize*, or have the ability to put together various aspects of sampling knowledge and skill to create the whole process that reflects innovative ways of integrating research and practice. In all cases, the course objectives state the minimum level of expectation for student learning.

The taxonomy and continuum of learning expectations developed for courses in the research sequence were put into action after being approved by first the curriculum committee and then by the faculty as a whole. Following this approval all five research course syllabi were modified to include Figure 2 and by revising course objectives according to Figure 3.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The taxonomy-based continuum of learning expectations developed for social work students taking BSW or MSW research courses has several implications for improving the research climate within a social work school's curriculum. First, the learning continuum serves as a

communication tool than can aid efforts to diffuse student anxiety associated with social work research courses. Integrating Bloom's taxonomy across the sequence of research courses offered in a social work program spells out both the prerequisites and the level of expected "mastery" for each course. The ability to differentiate expectations from one course to the next empowers students explicating the criteria for passing and succeeding in all research courses required for BSW and MSW programs of study. By making clear the levels of learning expectation, students can get acquainted with research competencies not yet learned and prepare their study plans accordingly.

Additionally, the learning continuum aids social work students, instructors, and practitioners in accurately assessing an individual's proficiency at performing research tasks. Each level of Bloom's taxonomy translates into behavioral performance criteria that can be used to assess student levels of cognitive learning throughout a course, a program of study, or even a career. Achievement at the *knowledge* level, for example, can be demonstrated when students recall common research terms, identify major research concepts, or list key dates or events. In contrast, accomplishment at the *comprehension* level may require students to show understanding by summarizing research principles, contrasting key concepts, interpreting facts, or discussing ideas. Performance criteria become more complex with each additional level of the taxonomy.

Setting clear expectations of student learning as curriculum policy is a signal of institutional support that encourages instructors to search for creative ways to teach research and to develop accurate classroom assessment tools. The learning continuum is a guiding tool that aids research instructors in setting realistic expectations of student learning. Learning expectations set too high may risk losing student interest and motivation. An instructor that chooses to push students beyond the policy-prescribed level of learning for a single course must also responsibly plan for the increased levels of student anxiety that will result.

Keeping student learning expectation within curriculum policy also increases the likelihood that students will encounter consistent expectations across different instructors. This does not suggest that research instructors must use the same teaching methods, however. Faculty members retain the academic freedom to use lecture material, classroom exercises, and assessment strategies they believe will best promote the greatest amount of student learning in their courses. The continuum of learning does not dictate instructional approach or teaching style, but it does set the bar for where students should theoretically be at the end of a particular course. On the other hand, the learning con-

tinuum can guide research instructors in planning lectures or class lessons. Course objectives set at higher levels of expectation may require more time and instruction than those set at lower levels of expectations, for example.

The continuum of learning described in this paper is only a starting point for future evaluation of courses in the research sequence of the social work curriculum. It is one step in an ongoing process of curricular development and planning that has made it easier for faculty and students in one school of social work to discuss research expectations for a student body that is studying to become social work practitioners. The continuum clarifies expectations for students and relieves the burden that individual research instructors bear when carrying out the elusive charge of integrating research and practice. The taxonomy-based continuum also gives operational definitions of research proficiency that can be used for future student- and program-level evaluation.

NOTE

1. The Internet reference for the University of Cape Town (retrieved January 7, 2003) is <http://web.uct.ac.za/projects/cbe/mcqman/mcqappc.html>. The University of Victoria reference (retrieved January 7, 2003) is <http://www.coun.uvic.ca/learn/program/hndouts/bloom.html>.

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