

Dear Students of Social Work,

Recently, I wrote about case and cause advocacy and many have said that they found the explanation helpful. One person reminded me about the preface of Harry Specht and Mark Courtney's book *Unfaithful Angels*. Specht had lamented about what he saw as social work's drift away from social justice. He wrote, "When I first came to know social workers half a century ago, they had a mission that was, to me, appealing and significant: to help poor people, to improve community life, and to solve difficult social problems. But times have changed. Today, a significant proportion of social workers are practicing psychotherapy, and doing so privately, with a primarily middle-class, professional, Caucasian clientele" (p. ix-x).¹



The Debate over Case and Cause Advocacy

Specht's concerns are not new. The debate over the role of case and cause advocacy in social work stretches back to the profession's origins in the late 19th century. Much has been written about the differing perspectives of social work pioneers such as Jane Addams, with her focus on social reform and political action, and Mary Richmond, with her focus on individual casework. Furthermore, there is the tension between the micro and macro social work education emphasis and the call for training students to deepen in social casework skills with an equal pressure to widen students' appreciation of the breath of community work.

All of these are important in social work education but encouraging involvement in both approaches from students and practicing professionals can be challenging. We will all agree too that the following are all roles of a social worker:

- Helping a family connect to financial assistance and community resources
- Counselling a client and the family struggling with mental health issues
- Organizing a neighbourhood revitalization project
- Lobbying lawmakers to enact legislation to protect the vulnerable²

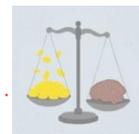
What sets social work apart from many other professions concerned with human well-being is the seemingly unlimited ways we approach our work.

While some can embrace the widening possibilities, unlimited ways and multiple modalities, others can find it daunting because of its perceived lack of certainty and precision. What is clear is that the profession encourages social workers to embrace both perspectives. And it is important to understand that *they are not a dichotomy*.

Image courtesy of David Castillo Dominici at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Case and Cause Advocacy

- both have their place and need not be a balancing act



So the challenge for social work education is to balance the difficult task of preserving social work's focus on multiple modalities while ensuring that students master certain core competencies needed for professional work. Charlotte Towle, wrote about this tension in the journal, *Social Service Review*. She said, "Gradually, we have come to the point of view that, while the demands of professional education cannot be individualized, the student can and must be individualized throughout the educational process."²

Image courtesy of ratch0013 at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

1 Specht, H., & Courtney, M. E. (1995). *Unfaithful Angels: How Social Work Has Abandoned its Mission* (pp. ix-x). New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

2 Reardon, C. (2012). *Case and Cause in Social Work Education – A Balancing Act*. *Social Work Review*, volume 12 (No. 2), page 20.

Despite the on-going debate about social work's role as a case or cause profession, there is a slight inclination for the majority of students studying social work today wanting to pursue a career as a social caseworker. Students should open themselves up to using a wider range of modalities. Increasingly, students should avail themselves of opportunities in community planning/organization, management/administration, social policy, and program development evaluation. Increasingly too, we should encourage discussion about the role community organizing, policy analysis, and advocacy play in social work. With the setting up of Social Service Offices, there will be growing opportunities for social work students to apply both case and cause social work education.

Student placements are signature pedagogies and offer opportunities where micro and macro work can be intertwined in real practice settings. Placements and classroom teaching should collectively equip students with competencies that reach across professional practice and evaluation and research. But since social work students are often so influenced by the practitioners they encounter while in school, it is important that schools expose students to social workers who have embraced both case and cause advocacy as part of their professional lives.

Social work is exciting because it is a discipline that enables clear connections among policies, the social environment, and client circumstances.

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