

The ACBSW Credential, "What Good Is It Anyway?": Four Perspectives

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This paper reviews the history, development, and purpose of the Academy of Certified Baccalaureate Social Workers (ACBSW) credential. The authors address four perspectives: (a) the development of the ACBSW examination, (b) promoting the ACBSW credential, (c) the importance of the ACBSW credential for baccalaureate programs, and (d) the importance of the ACBSW from a BSW perspective. The authors advocate for the existence of this credential on the basis of the quality of its standards, the assistance it offers to BSW practitioners, perception of clients toward the certificate, and the effects it has on BSW degree programs.

Note: At its June 1995 meeting, the National Association of Social Worker's National Board of Directors voted to discontinue issuing the ACBSW

The Academy of Certified Baccalaureate Social Workers (ACBSW) is a competency credential for baccalaureate social workers. The concept was generated by members of BPD in concert with NASW in an effort to promote BSW graduates. With the passage of time, the ACBSW credential has become controversial. The authors pull no punches; they strongly advocate the existence of this important credential. In an effort to educate baccalaureate program directors and educators, they provide four perspectives.

The first perspective, "The Development of the ACBSW Examination," outlines the history and technical aspects of the credential. The standards established for the ACBSW are impressive and note that the credential benefits social work as a profession, BSW social workers, but most importantly, social work clients. The second perspective, "Promoting the ACBSW Credential," describes the complex process of "getting the word out." Earnest and Herculean efforts have been made to encourage BSW graduates to pursue the credential. The third perspective offers a linkage between BSW education and the ACBSW credential. In the

"Importance of the ACBSW Credential for Baccalaureate Programs," the authors remind the reader of the historical conflict over limited social work positions and how these positions are being usurped by those who do not have a social work education. Finally, the authors address the overall "Importance of the ACBSW Credential." Here, a BSW graduate writes about the substantive meaning of the credential. It has a profound effect on self-esteem and client confidence!

The Development of the ACBSW Examination

The creation of a standardized examination begins with a job analysis survey (American College Testing, 1990; Teare, Sheafor, & Shank, 1988, 1989a, 1989b). The survey is developed by "subject-matter experts" in the field or area to be examined and with the assistance of a professional psychometric testing firm. The survey for the ACBSW examination was developed by a group of baccalaureate social worker practitioners and educators. With the assistance of American College Testing (ACT), over 100 questions about baccalaureate social work practice were created. The

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survey instrument was designed to address two issues. First, how frequently do social workers complete a defined task? Second, how critical is each task for their career?

Almost 1,500 responses were received from the 2,500 BSWs to whom the survey was sent. The data were analyzed at ACT and the report prepared (American College Testing, 1990). The data from this report and the BSW curriculum knowledge base were used by the Examination Development Committee to formulate the content outline or "blueprint" for the ACBSW examination. The Examination Development Committee was composed of 20 subject matter experts representing baccalaureate social work education and practice. After the content specifications were decided, a smaller group of subject matter experts decided the percentage of examination questions for each content area. Table 1 provides the content outline of the ACBSW examination:

Table 1: ACBSW Examination Content Outline

- I. The Cultural Context of Social Welfare and Social Work (9%)
 - A. Culture
 - B. Values

- II. Human Functioning at the Individual, Group, and Community Levels (10%)
 - A. Personal and Group Identity
 - B. Community

- III. The Biopsychological Foundations of Human Need (10%)
 - A. Social Problems
 - B. Social Institutions
 - C. Social Differentiation
 - D. Social Power

- IV. The Structure of Societal Responses to Meet Human Need (13%)
 - A. Social Systems
 - B. Social Institution
 - C. Roles
 - D. Formal Organization

- V. Strategies for Professional Intervention to Achieve Planned Change (15%)
 - A. Teaching and Learning

- B. Interpersonal Influence
- C. Communication
- D. Social Change
- E. Research

- VI. Information Gathering and Assessment (19%)
 - A. Developing Awareness of Others
 - B. Obtaining Information
 - C. Evaluating Resources
 - D. Interpreting and Analyzing Information
 - E. Analyzing Policy
 - F. Identifying Social Problems
 - G. Problem Identification With Client

- VII. The Development and Use of the Professional Self (4%)
 - A. Maintaining Professional Identity
 - B. Interpreting Professional Roles

- VIII. Practice Activities With Individuals, Groups, and Communities as Well as Within Organizations (14%)
 - A. Managing Data and Information
 - B. Managing Relationships
 - C. Managing Situations
 - D. Managing Organizational Activities
 - E. Applying Practice Theory

- IX. Evaluation of Professional Activities (6%)
 - A. Assessing One's Own Intervention Activities
 - B. Assessing Program Efforts and Results

Because the Competence Certification Commission (CCC) and the Examination Development Committee wanted more than the standard multiple choice question format, an "in-basket" section was developed. A BSW work setting was created along with descriptions of three cases situations. Materials that would typically be found in the assigned worker's in-basket were created: messages, case notes, referral information, memoranda, assignments, and so forth. These materials were placed in an envelope and given to the examinee to review before answering a number of multiple choice questions (10 to 15 - depending on the scenarios) on the examination. It was thought that

using this format created a more realistic situation and tested the examinee's ability to integrate, prioritize, and synthesize material.

NASW has long been committed to offsetting the effects of the potential adverse impact of multiple choice examinations for social workers who are good practitioners but are not "test-wise." The ACSW examination, reference and supervisory ratings, and years of experience all contribute to the composite passing score. NASW was committed to awarding the ACBSW on the basis of more than just the examination. It was decided that some of content specifics could be best measured by the performance evaluation form and that the rating on this form would be part of a passing score.

For each of those 28 content areas, a description of acceptable performance was written. On the basis of that description, four statements were developed describing performance in each of the relevant areas:

1. Completely unacceptable performance.
2. Just below the minimally acceptable performance.
3. The minimally acceptable performance.
4. Outstanding performance.

These statements were edited and arranged in four different formats of a performance evaluation form. Form One contained all four statements for each content area at random so that the evaluator was required to answer "yes" or "no" to 112 statements. Form Two had all four statements grouped together with instructions for the evaluator to check the statement in each group that most nearly described the candidate's performance. Only the minimally acceptable and just below acceptable statements were paired with instructions to choose one as the best description of the candidate's performance for each content area on Form Three. On Form Four these same two statements for each area were placed at random so that the evaluator was asked to answer "yes" or "no" to 56 statements about the candidate's performance.

During the grandparenting period, these four formats were piloted. Based on the statistical analysis of the rating given on the four formats of the reference form and the feedback from evaluators, Form Three was chosen for permanent use in the ACBSW application process. Most importantly, Form Three has received rave reviews from the professionals who have systematically analyzed it. For example, the format for Form Three is being

considered as a tool to upgrade the screening mechanism for the ACSW protocol. A copy of this final reference form can be found in the appendix.

After the evaluation blueprint was finalized, members of the examination development committee and selected BSW practitioners and educators were trained by ACT to write multiple choice questions and construct in-basket scenarios. In addition to completing items, item writers agreed to provide test questions over a 2-year period.

Seven of the item-writers were appointed to the ACBSW Examination Review Committee (ERC). This committee is responsible for reviewing new items for accurate content, plausible answers, correct answers, and correct relationship to the content blueprint. The committee is also responsible for reviewing, question by question, each form of the examination before it is given and setting the passing score. All of this work is conducted under the guidance of American College Testing.

Overseeing the development and administration of NASW's credentials is the Competence Certification Commission (CCC). The CCC was created in 1989 by the NASW board of directors as a "quasi-independent" unit composed of 14 NASW member volunteers appointed by the NASW president. The CCC has independent authority for decisions regarding what credentials to offer and the eligibility criteria for credentials, and oversight responsibility for the development and administration of any examinations connected to the credentials. The NASW board of directors maintains fiscal authority and responsibility for the NASW credentialing program budget. Therefore, if the board detects that cost overruns exist, they have an opportunity to alter or eliminate any credential program.

Each NASW credential that involves an examination has an Examination Review Committee (ERC). The Qualified Clinical Social Worker and the NASW Diplomate in Clinical Social Work credentials related to the NASW Register of Clinical Social Workers (National Association of Social Workers, 1993) are governed by the Committee on Clinical Social Work. Each of these committees is composed of seven members who themselves hold the credential and are appointed by the NASW president. The chairperson of the ERC is a member of the Competence Certification Commission.

The development of a standardized examination is a time-consuming, labor-intensive,

and expensive process. The examination content must be based on what the examinees have learned in school and relate to actual on-the-job functions in order to be valid. The questions must be edited to be clear and concise and to remove any potential discriminatory language. The development and administration of an examination requires many volunteer hours, staff support, and the support of a psychometric testing firm.

Promoting the ACBSW Credential

Since its inception, efforts to promote the ACBSW credential have focused on reaching BSW practitioners, BSW employers, and BSW students through a variety of marketing strategies. NASW has only approximately 3,000 BSW members - a small number of the estimated practitioners. Since there is no one organization or repository of BSW practitioners' names and addresses, reaching BSW practitioners directly was the most difficult task. Reaching BSWs through their employers and their undergraduate BSW programs appeared to be the best methods for promoting the credential. Information from the job analysis indicated that most BSWs work in child welfare, home health care, nursing homes, public welfare, and social services agencies; therefore, most of the emphasis was placed in advertising the credential in these settings.

For the 1991 grandparenting administration, names and addresses of recent graduates were obtained from baccalaureate social work programs, and brochures were sent to over 20,000 BSW practitioners. Based on the information from the job analysis, employers in health care, residential treatment, family service, services to the aged, public welfare, and runaway youth facilities were provided information on the ACBSW and encouraged to have their BSW employees apply.

Because the number of applicants for the first examination far exceeded expectations (2,100 applied; 1,000 were anticipated), the strategy for the second year was to expand on the promotional activities begun during the first year. Information about the credential was sent to BSW program directors to ask their support in promoting the credential to their alumni and current students. Enclosed were ACBSW display ads, ACBSW brochures, and news articles that they could place in their alumni newsletters. Letters accompanied by brochures were also sent to the field education coordinators requesting their assistance in promoting

the credential to their field instructors.

To reach a large portion of BSW employers, lists of members were purchased from National Association of Home Care, American Health Care Association, United Way, American Public Welfare Association, and National Council of Community Mental Health Centers. Cover letters and brochures were sent with the request that the employer display the brochure on the office bulletin board and circulate them directly to employees. The cover letter stressed the value of hiring and retaining BSW employees and demonstrated how credentialed staff would benefit the agency.

Brochures were also sent to over 3,000 NASW members who were qualified to pursue the credential as well as to the 55 NASW state chapter offices to distribute. Additional display ads and articles were placed in the NASW News, NASW chapter newsletters, the BPD Update, Child Welfare, Families in Society, and Human Services in the Rural Environment among others.

With this massive marketing endeavor (over 100,000 brochures disseminated), only 147 BSWs applied for the credential for the second administration, which gave the Examination Review Committee and NASW staff cause to reevaluate the marketing strategies and target a more specific audience for the 1993 exam. The ERC met with NASW staff to develop a marketing plan that would generate 500 applicants for the next exam administration.

The first targeted group were the NASW BSW members who still did not have the credential. Engraved invitations were sent to apply for the credential at a special NASW fee of \$95.00. Close to 1,900 invitations were sent, which resulted in 125 persons requesting applications. Additionally, display ads were placed in NASW News and NASW chapter newsletters.

The second group targeted were friends and colleagues of persons who already had the credential. The ACBSW Update newsletter was written and distributed to over 2,100 academy members. This newsletter highlighted the value of the ACBSW credential as well as promoted BSW practice and was well received. Two ACBSW brochures were sent with each newsletter, and the academy members were asked to invite their friends and colleagues to apply for the credential. In addition, the newsletter advertised the availability of free ACBSW posters to be hung on agency bulletin boards.

The third group targeted were licensed BSW practitioners who were not NASW members. ACBSW information was included as part of an NASW membership recruitment packet that was sent to over 8,000 licensed BSWs in Alabama, Idaho, New Mexico, and South Carolina.

To determine how academy members felt about the credential and to discover additional ways to promote the credential, three ERC members volunteered to conduct surveys of ACBSW members in Minnesota, North Carolina, and Washington. Many of the recommendations from these surveys were executed. Most had to do with contacting various state organizations and providing them with ACBSW materials and display ads.

Letters were also sent to all BSW directors whose programs were being reaccredited by the Council on Social Work Education in 1994 or 1995. These letters encouraged the programs to have their students and alumni obtain the credential as a factor that would support their self-study and their reaccreditation. Additionally, arrangements were made with the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors to enclose ACBSW brochures with the BSW program outcome assessment survey forms that they developed.

The ERC members were also concerned about the extent of BSW practitioners' participation within NASW at the chapter leadership level, believing that more BSW involvement would help promote BSW issues and the ACBSW credential. A survey was conducted and found that most chapters who have BSW members on their chapter boards have BSW student members, not BSW practitioners.

Another project that the ERC members and NASW staff believed would promote the credential was a brochure that would educate social service employers about BSW education and practice. The concern was that many employers were hiring nondegree social workers for social work positions and were not knowledgeable about the BSW degree. BSW practitioners were having to compete for jobs for which they were the best-trained and most appropriate applicants. For these reasons, a BSW brochure was designed with the tag line, "Would you hire a chemist to fill a nursing position? That's what it's like to hire a sociologist or psychologist for a social work position." The brochure was produced in October 1993 in cooperation with the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors and the Council on Social Work Education and was

written in a manner that could also be used to promote undergraduate BSW programs. The brochure had a section on legal regulation and professional credentials for BSWs where the ACBSW was described. It was launched at the October BPD conference in Baltimore and was an overwhelming success.

The results of the more targeted marketing efforts in 1993 produced fewer credential applicants than in the previous year. What this means is that NASW has not received sufficient income from the credential in either 1992 or 1993 to offset the expenses incurred to administrate and promote the credential. The future of the credential is thus uncertain and will be determined by NASW's board of directors in the coming year. While the ACBSW credential has progressed in a similar manner as credentials of other associations (huge enrollment during the grandparenting period when everyone passes the examination, followed by low numbers the next few years until it reaches a moderate and reliable number), its fate is unclear. Many believe that the credential needs a minimum of 5 years of promotion before success or failure can be determined. All of this information will be considered by NASW in deciding the ACBSW's future.

Importance of the ACBSW Credential for Baccalaureate Programs

Four key points emphasize the importance of the ACBSW credential for baccalaureate programs. These include (a) the legitimatization of the BSW degree, (b) professionalism for BSWs, (c) pursuing the MSW, and (d) altruistic motives. The authors discuss each of these issues.

The Legitimatization of the BSW Degree

It comes as no surprise to any BSW director or faculty member that there is a long-standing debate regarding the legitimacy of the BSW degree. Most of this debate is oral, although at times we can see hints of it in our scholarly literature (Blythe & Witkins, 1992; Fraser, Jenson, & Lewis, 1993; Hoffman & Kolevzon, 1992; Lowe, 1985). However, in some areas of social work education, authors assume that BSWs represent a legitimate level of social work education (Glisson & Fischer, 1987). However, literature assuming legitimacy for BSW education is more difficult to find.

The ACBSW contributes an important

function to the legitimacy of the BSW degree. As noted earlier, when a BSW graduate fulfills the requirements, the National Association of Social Workers "attests that" the practitioner meets a national standard. Thus, BSW social work practice is not only officially sanctioned, but the certificate acknowledges that such social work is important and meaningful. The ACBSW credential is a formal and concrete sign that reinforces the legitimacy of the BSW degree. In fact, the mere existence of the ACBSW credential leaves little room for debating the legitimacy of the BSW degree. BSW program directors need to support avenues that enhance BSW legitimacy. The ACBSW certificate is one of these important avenues.

Professionalism for BSWs

Data (Hull, Ray, Rogers, & Smith, 1991, 1992) suggest that BSW graduates do not retain their membership in the National Association of Social Workers. Why? There are many speculations. Some of the reasons include the high cost of membership. Other reasons include the question asked by numerous BSW graduates, "What does NASW do for me?" The list of activities relevant to BSW practice is very short - by anyone's count. BSW program directors and faculty need to support avenues that maintain high levels of professionalism for BSW social workers, such as the ACBSW certificate. We would like all our students to join professional organizations. According to membership data from NASW, our efforts have failed - badly. Directors and faculty need to pursue stronger efforts to instill professionalism in our graduates.

Pursuing the MSW

Most BSW graduates do not pursue the MSW degree. In fact, data (Hull et al., 1991, 1992) suggest that approximately 27% of BSW graduates complete the MSW degree. When one considers that most BSWs cannot afford to join NASW, the major professional recognition is limited to the BSW degree. The ACBSW certificate adds to the prestige and self-esteem of the BSW graduate who has very limited contact with other social work professionals. The attachment to professional images adds to the professional activities of the BSW social worker. That, in turn, improves the image of these entry-level social workers and provides greater support for the existence of BSW academic programs.

"Would you hire a chemist to fill a nursing

position? That's what it's like to hire a sociologist or psychologist for a social work position." We attempt to instill pride and uniqueness in the work of our BSW students, but when we have an opportunity to put this expression on a concrete level, we seem to fail. When we speak of professionalism and do not support the ACBSW, we become hypocritical. Our words of support are not consistent with our actions.

Altruistic Motives

Most directors and faculty of BSW programs see little to no personal value in being certified or licensed. However, such certification is important for the profession as a whole. Unpublished data compiled by NASW suggest that state licensing is having an impact on ACSW. Many have hypothesized that it is also affecting admissions to ACBSW. However, state licensing should not affect national certification. ACBSW and ACSW should be used as a mechanism to demonstrate loyalty to the profession.

Social work educators have lost much of our altruism that was snatched from us during the "me generation" of the 1980s. The ACSW and ACBSW credentials may do more for the profession than the individual! What's wrong with that? What is good for the image of the entire profession ends up being the greater good for all of us - including social workers who are not members of NASW. In general, social worker practitioners must become more altruistic when examining the utility of nonmandated certificates. This means, of course, that social work educators must play the leadership role and pursue, use, and display the certificates.

Importance of the ACBSW Credential: A BSW Perspective

The ACBSW is a credential which is not easily earned or awarded to those who seek it. It is a mark of excellence that transcends the state registration, certificate, or license. In particular, to gain the ACBSW certificate, one must graduate from a CSWE-accredited program. Such an eligibility requirement is not included in many state regulations. In addition, the candidate must complete 2 years of social work practice within the past 10 years, a performance evaluation and, of course, the written examination.

The ACBSW credential is as important to the profession as the ACSW, which is the only national recognition of competency for MSW

generalist practice. BSWs who hold this credential have proven themselves to be the cream of the crop. They are proud of the work they do and of the profession they have chosen. In fact, baccalaureate social workers are doing many of the tasks which were performed by MSW social workers 10 years ago (American College Testing, 1990). Thus, it becomes essential that the National Association of Social Workers show support and confidence for BSWs by continuing this credential. If we do not recognize and support BSWs as viable members of NASW and the profession in some meaningful way, what are we saying to them? "Just kidding; 10 years ago your activities were considered professional when an MSW did them but are no longer considered professional since BSWs are doing them"?

The social worker who pursues and obtains the ACBSW credential is proud of the profession and is committed. As the general public and social work employers become more aware of the value of this credential and those who hold it, we will see ACBSW members earn higher wages and placed in positions of greater responsibility than their BSW colleagues. An initial but nonrandom survey demonstrates that the ACBSW credential played a key role for some in receiving raises and new job positions. Why? Because ACBSW membership represents excellence. As more and more employers realize this fact, more BSW graduates will pursue the certificate. In addition, clients are beginning to notice the ACBSW certificate. The display of the certificate facilitates a greater security. Yes, the ACBSW is enhancing client/social worker relationships.

Sadly, but as with all new credentials, public awareness of its value will take time. Cost is an issue but not the only one to be considered. Because of the high cost of maintaining this important credential, the NASW board of directors may veto its existence. That will be a sad day for the entire profession.

Conclusion and Summary

"The ACBSW: What good is it anyway?" To understand the good of ACBSW, one first must appreciate the complexity and the high standards that were used in the development and promotion of the credential. The history of the ACBSW is nothing less than impressive. As a result, baccalaureate program directors have an excellent avenue to utilize the certification as a method of procuring employment opportunities for their graduates. BSWs have a rare opportunity for national recognition. The ACBSW provides this important recognition. It promotes self-esteem and confidence from clients who see the

certificate hanging on the wall.

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