Using the Social Work Advocacy Practice Model to Find Our Voices in Service of Advocacy

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Using the Social Work Advocacy Practice Model to Find Our Voices in Service of Advocacy

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Social work has long embraced advocating for vulnerable populations, yet there has been concern the profession has moved away from this historical mission. A review of the literature reveals an abundance of articles on advocacy, most of which highlight strategies and tactics employed in specific settings. Less prominent are practice models that consist of comprehensive conceptual and operational frameworks to guide the advocacy process. The Social Work Advocacy Practice Model provides a framework for guiding social workers in developing, implementing, and evaluating advocacy efforts. Qualitative feedback from social work students who pilot-tested the model is provided. Lessons learned are discussed.

Keywords: administration, advocacy, advocate, community outreach, engagement, practice model, social networking, social work, teaching

INTRODUCTION

Social work has a long history of engaging in advocacy efforts on behalf of individuals, families, groups, and communities (Brawley, 1997). From the time of the Progressive Movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as evidenced by the work of Jane Addams and Dorothea Dix (Greene & Latting, 2004), to the present, social workers are called upon to uphold the long tradition of advocating for vulnerable populations (Allen-Meares, 1997).

Despite calls to continue with this tradition, there were those who believed that social work had lost sight of its historical mission to work with less privileged populations by focusing more on seeking individualistic solutions to social problems via the provision of psychotherapeutic services in private practice settings (Specht & Courtney, 1994). Some might argue with the veracity of this assertion though, as “complex forces affect the social work profession and often result in new technologies, goals, and targets of intervention” (Walz & Groze, 1991, p. 500) that can result in changes in the mission of the profession that some parties applaud while others condemn. Yet, a national study of retired social work educators on changes in social work, (Walz & Craft, 1988, as cited in Walz & Groze, 1991) identified the diminished role of advocacy as one of the three concerns that were cited.

As provocative as these assertions are, there does not appear to similar sentiments in the social work literature since this time, which calls into question whether social work has really lost its
focus on advocacy or whether alternative explanations are available. The literature does support the latter as these assertions do not appear to take into consideration the impact that changes in the political environment during the 1980s and early 1990s, such as the emerging trend toward devolution (Wolfer & Gray, 2014), globalization, and a political environment that became decidedly more conservative in nature (McNutt & Menon, 2008), had on traditional notions of advocacy. This necessitated social work to “rethink advocacy practice in light of new realities (Fitzgerald & McNutt, 1999, p. 331).

There is evidence that social work heeded this call as one new area of advocacy that had been explored is the use of the Internet and electronic technology. For example, Fitzgerald, McNutt (1999) and McNutt and Menon (2008) suggested that the forces of globalization and devolution can be responded to using new technologically-based advocacy techniques. Moon and DeWeaver (2005) discussed how the growth of the Internet and availability of low cost computers and user friendly software has led to the need to more fully use electronic advocacy. Edwards and Hoefer (2010) discussed the role that Web 2.0 can play in the advocacy process. Finally, Donaldson and Shields (2009), in developing their Policy Advocacy Behavior Scale, stated “contemporary trends in social policy development, such as the devolution of policymaking to state and local levels, increased privatization of social welfare services, and cuts in funding for social programs underscore the need for social work to reclaim its role in advocacy and systems reform” (p. 83).

Even before the 1980s-1990s when these assertions began to be made, advocacy had not been a static aspect of social work practice as the social issues, political climate, and policy implications varied greatly over time and profoundly influenced the degree of social work involvement in advocacy efforts. For example, in providing a brief history of policy making and advocacy, Brueggemann (2006) highlighted the differences in social, political, and economic contexts between the Progressive Era from 1885-1915, the 1930s and the impact of the Great Depression, the 1940s and 1950s which were shaped by World War II and the emergence of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the turbulent 1960s with the civil rights movement, war on poverty, and protest against the Viet Nam War, the 1970s and 1980s characterized by the emergence of a more conservative political and cultural landscape, the 1990s with its emphasis on devolution and welfare reform, and the 2000s and the greater emphasis on the increasingly ethnic diversity in the United States and the influence of globalization.

Perhaps within this dynamic historical context, the type of advocacy practiced by Jane Addams and others in the Progressive Movement would not be feasible to practice today. In that case, idealized notions of advocacy based on the past should not be used as a basis for criticizing the lack of advocacy in social work in the present without understanding that some of the barriers today might not have been operative in previous eras. For example, Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2006) noted that social workers might be afraid of controversy or consider advocacy too confrontational and worry about how they would be perceived by others in their advocacy efforts. Unlike those in the Progressive Movement who typically had the financial means to engage in advocacy efforts without fear of losing their livelihoods, many social workers today are employed by the very agencies whose policies they would need to advocate against in their support of vulnerable populations. Similarly, Schneider and Lester (2001) provided a broad overview of historical and professional issues that can hinder advocacy efforts by social workers including increased preoccupation with their direct service provider role, lack of professional norms and standards regarding advocacy, lack of training and education, and a misunderstanding about the nature of advocacy.

While this article does not purport to settle the debate as to whether social work abandoned its historic role in terms of advocacy, it is clear that the trends discussed earlier necessitate changes in how social work engages in advocacy in the 21st century. While a review of the literature reveals a substantial number of articles on social work advocacy, most of which focused on specific strategies and tactics employed in various contexts. Unfortunately, the review revealed a limited number of advocacy practice models that social workers can use, and even then, most did not provide a
comprehensive conceptual and operational framework to guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of advocacy campaigns.

While some articles discussed conceptual aspects of advocacy such as skills needed to engage in advocacy and others examined operational aspects of advocacy such as specific tactics that can be employed, no practice model that integrates both the conceptual and operational aspects of advocacy was found. For example, in their discussion of macro level advocacy, Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2006) provided six general guidelines to follow for advocacy implementation including “Be Reasonable in What You Undertake” and “Teamwork Often Produces Better Outcomes” (p. 351). They then provided an overview of advocacy tactics such as persuasion and political pressure. Similarly, Hardcastle and Powers (2004) focused on a set of four advocacy skills including persuasion and representation. Other writers utilized more targeted approaches in recommending advocacy skills and tactics. Lens (2005) emphasized the need for social workers to use rhetorical skills in advocating in the public arena. Fitzgerald and McNutt (1999) provided a framework social work educators can use to teach students how to use new forms of electronic advocacy utilizing the power of computers and the Internet. In recognition of the need of social workers to engage in advocacy efforts to meet the challenges of the 21st century, Schneider and Lester (2001) developed a new definition of social work advocacy as “the exclusive and mutual representation of a client(s) or a cause in a forum, attempting to systematically influence decision making in an unjust or unresponsive system(s)” (p. 65). In addition, they developed a general practice framework for using this new definition of advocacy that incorporates two fundamental advocacy skills (representation and influencing) to support advocacy. Finally, Freddolino, Moxley, and Hyduk (2004) proposed a differential model of advocacy that is composed of four major traditions of advocacy within social work – protecting the vulnerable, creating supports to enhance functioning, protecting and advancing claims or appeals, and fostering identity and control (p. 119).

The purpose of this article is to provide a social work advocacy practice model that consists of both a conceptual and operational framework for developing, implementing, and evaluating advocacy campaigns.

THE SOCIAL WORK ADVOCACY PRACTICE MODEL

The Social Work Advocacy Model is derived from the components of the advocacy process. For example, Freddolino, Moxley, and Hyduk (2004) stated “the purpose of advocacy within the profession is to improve the social status of individuals who may be considered vulnerable or oppressed, thereby enhancing their standing within a specific social system whether it is a community, organization, service system, societal institution, or society itself” (p. 119). Mosley (2013) stated policy advocacy “is advocacy that is directed at changing policies or regulations that affect practice or group well-being” (p. 231). Dunlop and Fawcett (2008) stated the practice of advocacy includes the social work skills “getting issues on the public agenda, social marketing, policy-related research to influence decision-makers, preparations of briefs and proposals, and reforming internal program operations” (p. 143). Donaldson and Shields (2009) differentiated policy or class advocacy from case advocacy as the former “refers to efforts to change social systems to benefit a population of people, as opposed to case advocacy, which refers to helping individual clients access systems to receive benefits” (p. 83). Finally, McNutt (2011) noted “despite the importance of advocacy and the commitment of social workers to it, there is little evidence about how well different types of advocacy work and whether it is worth the often considerable costs (p. 397).

In reviewing these and other conceptualizations of the advocacy process in the literature, the following five key components emerge.
1. **Cause**: Whether advocacy is done on behalf of an individual or population, there is always a party or cause that is to be the beneficiary of advocacy efforts.

2. **Outcome**: Advocacy efforts are done in order to bring about some change in the status of the beneficiary from being able to receive benefits in the event of case advocacy to changing policies on state or national levels in the event of policy advocacy.

3. **Target Audience**: Given the party that is being advocated on behalf of is not considered as being able to bring about these changes in outcomes on their own, advocacy efforts are directed toward specific parties who are considered as able to bringing about these changes in outcomes. This could entail a case worker at a local social service agency helping a client to access services to the United States Congress passing a new law on the provision of services to a certain population.

4. **Strategies and Tactics**: This consists of the plans and activities that the advocating entity will engage in to hopefully influence the target audience and bring about the desired outcome.

5. **Evaluation**: This component has typically not been highlighted in the advocacy literature as McNutt (2011) noted. Yet, without this component, the advocating entity will be “flying blind” in terms of having formative and summative feedback about their advocacy efforts.

The author, who had a marketing background before entering the social work profession, wanted to develop a practical model that could be used to guide the process of developing, implementing, and evaluating diverse types of advocacy campaigns. As such, the model is more based on practice wisdom rather being derived from a theoretical framework. The model is primarily linear in nature in that each component of the advocacy process logically flows from the previous one, although the evaluation component is typically circular in nature in that every step of the model has a process evaluation piece to it that assesses in real time whether the steps of the model are being implemented in efficient and effective ways to help achieve the desired goals.

Figure 1 illustrates the framework of the Social Work Advocacy Practice Model, followed a more detailed discussion of the components of the model along with key process questions that social workers can consider in their advocacy planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts.

**Cause**

Social workers care about making a difference regarding certain causes ranging from helping an individual client access needed services to the more abstract such as child welfare, reducing poverty, helping the homeless, promoting mental health, working with the elderly, to name but a few. This wide range of focus can necessitate the need to either narrow or expand the focus of the cause depending on the particular parameters of the situation. For example, a community organizer may narrow the focus of the cause to a specific population in the community such as the homeless rather than the homeless on a national level. While he or she may believe there needs to be a change in federal policy about funding programs for the homeless nationally, he or she may believe it...
better to keep the focus of the cause on the narrow side by keeping the scope of the cause on the community level.

The cause then is what produces the desire for a particular change in outcome (e.g., ending child abuse or helping a client access services). Thus, the justification for what constitutes a cause is something intrinsic to the belief system of the party that wishes a different outcome in relation to some issue. As such, what constitutes a cause is socially determined.

While the rubric above places an emphasis on the importance of belief, often with an emotional component, in defining what constitutes a cause, caring about an issue and desiring a different outcome is not sufficient to bring about needed change. All too often, social workers are dismissed as “bleeding hearts” when they rely on more emotional appeals for the basis for why some outcome should occur. To counter this dismissive reaction, social workers also need to possess sufficient background information about the cause such as prevalence data, pertinent characteristics, or even why others should care about the cause as much as the social worker does. Thus, social workers also need to do the necessary homework in order to thoroughly understand the cause, and more importantly, why others should care, rather than rely on emotional appeals as the primary source of content information. This helps to empower social workers in trying to inform and persuade parties that might not share the same positive view of the cause. Figure 2 illustrates the process questions that need to be addressed relative to identifying the cause that will be the point of advocacy focus.

**Outcome(s)**

The next step is to identify the outcome or outcomes that are desired relative to the cause. Kettner, Moroney, and Martin (1999) defined an outcome as “a measurable change in quality of life achieved by a client between entry into and exit from a program” (p. 118). While this definition is more applicable at a micro level, from a more macro level an outcome can involve a change in a regulation

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**Figure 2** Cause process questions.

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<th>Cause Process Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the cause you are interested in? For example, is it an individual client or a population with shared characteristics such as veterans?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. How narrow or wide does the scope of the cause need to be? Are you biting off more than you can chew in wanting to tackle a global problem such as poverty when it might be more appropriate to address persons living in poverty in a particular community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do you have adequate background information on the cause such as its history, prevalence, past attempts to address the cause by other parties, social problems that are associated with it, how visible the cause is to others, etc.? It isn’t enough to care deeply about it as strong feelings won’t sway uninterested or uninformed parties. Do you know your cause inside and out?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Why others should care about the cause like you do?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Are you assuming that others share your sense of mission about needing to address the cause?</td>
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or policy to a class of people such as persons with disabilities to more abstract social problems such as poverty or environmental degradation.

It is important to note that outcomes can be behavioral or attitudinal. Examples of the former can include securing a change in a public policy or motivating people to donate money to a cause, while examples of the latter can include increasing public awareness of the cause or trying to change public attitudes about the cause. Understanding these differences is important in the decision-making about what strategies and tactics to employ as using consciousness raising to change attitudes and social action to change behaviors.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges in this step of the advocacy process is deciding on outcomes that are feasible. For example, ending poverty in third world countries is certainly a noble goal, but the likelihood of this happening, even with a sophisticated and comprehensive advocacy campaign, is quite remote. Therefore, it is important to think in terms of the linkage between short-term, attainable outcomes and how they can lead to the achievement of long-term outcomes. Additionally, it is very important to identify the sources of resistance to achieving outcomes such as generalized public apathy in the United States regarding problems in other countries to specific opposition to changing a public policy by local or national political leaders. Figure 3 illustrates the process questions that need to be addressed relative to identifying desired outcomes relative to the cause.

**Target Audience(s)**

Outcomes are by definition some change in a client state as the result of an intervention of some sort. As such, these changes are ultimately produced by people, either in terms of their attitudes, actions, or both. Therefore, the decision of which outcomes to pursue needs to be considered in terms of the parties whose attitudes or actions need to be influenced as it is these parties that can help produce the desired outcomes. These parties will then become the focal point or target of the specific strategies and tactics that will be employed. For example, policymakers would appear to be a logical target choice if the desired outcome was a change in policy. However, policymakers may be resistant to direct advocacy efforts so the target may end up being the general public, where consciousness raising approaches could bring enough pressure to the political system to effect a change in policy.

Among the more common targets, which can vary greatly on their understanding of the cause and their support for the proposed outcomes, are the general public, media, and policy makers, to

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Outcome Process Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What outcome or outcomes you would like to see happen relative to your cause such as it receiving increased public attention, gaining additional funding to support the cause, and changing public policies?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Are these outcomes short-term, long-term, or both, in nature?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Will these outcomes be a function of a change in attitudes, behaviors, or both?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How feasible are your outcomes, especially in terms of how complicated the problems associated with the cause are, sources of resistance to desired outcomes, availability of necessary resources to bring about desired outcomes, etc.?</td>
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**FIGURE 3** Outcome process questions.
name but a few. Therefore, it is important to understand their state of knowledge about the cause along with the possible points of view regarding the desired outcome as any strategies that do not take these factors into consideration are destined to be less than successful. Figure 4 illustrates the process questions that need to be addressed relative to identifying the target audiences that need to be influenced relative to achieving any desired outcomes.

**Figure 4** Target audiences process questions.

| 1. What audiences need to be influenced relative to achieving desired outcomes such as general public, political leaders, media sources, people directly affected by the cause? |
| 2. What are their points of view about the desired outcome? |
| 3. What sources of potential support and resistance do these audiences have? |
| 4. What do they stand to benefit from supporting the desired outcome and what do they stand to lose? |

**Strategies and Tactics**

Once the sufficient background work has been done in thoroughly understanding the cause, identifying desired outcomes, and analyzing the target audiences that need to be influenced, the next step is to develop a strategic plan for the specific actions that will be taken in order to influence the target audiences to engage in the necessary actions to bring about the desired outcomes. While much of the social work advocacy literature focuses on tactics that can be employed such as using persuasion, applying political pressure, and petitioning (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2006), the literature is not as clear on determining how to link the implementation of these tactics in a comprehensive framework to optimize the likelihood of being effective in bringing about the desired outcomes. Unfortunately, social work students who learn that advocacy consists primarily of tactics such as writing petitions, picketing, or posting videos to websites, will find that their efforts can ultimately be unsuccessful beyond initially experiencing the excitement of engaging in these activities. Similarly, social work practitioners, such as agency administrators, may be limited in their efforts to engage in effective advocacy due to reducing the complex calculus of what advocacy actually entails to the mere implementation of tactics and techniques. In reality, in many cases advocacy is a long-term process that requires the sustained implementation of multiple strategies over the course of time, often needing modification depending on circumstances, in order to achieve desired outcomes. Figure 5 illustrates the process questions that need to be addressed relative to developing strategies and tactics to help bring about the change in attitudes or behaviors in the target audiences necessary to achieve the desired outcomes.

**Evaluation**

The best of intentions regarding advocating for a cause do not guarantee these efforts will be successful. While social work students can get excited when they first begin to try out advocacy tactics such as writing letters to legislators, the excitement can often be naively misinterpreted as constituting a successful advocacy effort relative to bringing about a desired outcome. Similarly, an
FIGURE 5 Strategies and tactics process questions.

Strategies and Tactics Process Questions

1. What is your plan of action for trying to motivate or persuade the target audience to engage in specific attitude or behavior change relative to the desired outcome?
2. What strategy can feasibly be implemented and modified based on the evolving nature of circumstances in the advocacy domain such as changes in the political, economic, and social environments?
3. How can you link the nature of your strategy to what change you are trying to effect regarding your target audience? For example, are you using consciousness raising strategies for changing attitudes and using social action strategies for changing behaviors?
4. How can you use an evidence-based practice approach to help determine which strategies and tactics to utilize in a given situation?

FIGURE 6 Evaluation process questions.

Evaluation Process Questions

1. Have you developed an evaluative feedback mechanism to assess the effectiveness of your advocacy campaign in terms of both its process and outcomes?
2. Will you use real time and post hoc feedback to inform your advocacy efforts?
3. What are the pros and cons of using outputs as proxies for outcome indicators? How would using outputs given their relative ease in collecting impact the evaluation of the effectiveness of the advocacy campaign in terms of bringing about desired outcomes?
4. Have you clarified what constitutes “success” in terms of achieving desired outcomes?

agency administrator may believe that the sending of a periodic newsletter will have an influential impact on shaping public attitudes and behaviors, when, in fact, the percentage of recipients that actually read the newsletter is very small. These examples are similar in outcomes measurement systems of the fallacy of equating outputs with outcomes as just because an action is taken does not necessarily mean it leads to the desired short or long-term outcome. Therefore, the failure to develop an evaluation protocol that examines the process and outcome of advocacy efforts means that no true feedback is being collected, either in real-time or post hoc, to help inform advocacy efforts. Figure 6 illustrates the process questions that need to be addressed relative to evaluating the effectiveness of the advocacy campaign.
PILOT TESTING OF THE SOCIAL WORK ADVOCACY PRACTICE MODEL

The Social Work Advocacy Practice Model was pilot tested in two social work classes at a southeastern school of social work. These courses were chosen as they represented both BSW and MSW students along with one class having a clinical focus and one having a macro focus. In both classes, students had the option to choose whatever cause they wanted, determine which outcome they wanted to achieve (this was typically to raise public awareness about the cause), focus on whatever target audience they wished (this was typically fellow students and friends), utilize whatever strategy they wished to achieve the desired outcome, and create an evaluation protocol.

Students were given an overview of the Social Work Advocacy Practice Model via a PowerPoint presentation by the course instructor on the first day of class. Students then wrote a brief plan that described how they planned to utilize the model. Specifically, they discussed the cause they wanted to advocate for and why, the outcome they would like to achieve relative to the cause, the target audience they wanted to influence, the strategy they planned to employ, and how they would evaluate the effectiveness of their advocacy efforts. In addition, students were given the opportunity to give updates on their advocacy efforts using the model and to receive feedback from their peers and the course instructor throughout the semester. Finally, at the end of the semester students wrote a reflection paper that outlined how they implemented the model, their evaluation of the effectiveness of their advocacy efforts, and their plans to continue their advocacy efforts in the future. The assignment was self-graded in order to minimize performance anxiety students might experience in trying this new model. Given the time constraint of an academic semester, students were encouraged to keep their advocacy efforts simple.

Twenty-one students were in the undergraduate course and twenty-six students were in the graduate course. The undergraduate class was an advanced social work practice with communities and organizations course attended by seniors, while the graduate class was a clinical course in working with persons with addictive disorders. The majority of students were in their early to mid-20s, female, and Caucasian, although there was a sizable number of African American students and males in the two courses. Students were quite diverse in the causes they were interested in advocating for including mental health, education, capital punishment, military personnel and veterans, the environment, child welfare, and homelessness. In almost all cases, students had the desired outcome of increasing awareness of the need for addressing these causes. Target audiences typically were fellow students and friends. In order to assist students in learning how to use social networking technology in their advocacy efforts, the primary strategy students used involved creating their own social networking site using any of the design options at Ning.com. This provided students with a platform for engaging in the advocacy efforts through updating their sites with fresh content relevant to their advocacy efforts such as blog posts, photos, videos, discussion forums, and links. It should be noted that utilizing Ning created a kind of “one-stop-shop” that helped to focus students and keep their advocacy efforts simple.

Additionally, the use of this social networking software platform helped introduce students to the use of the type of Web 2.0 interactive technology that is becoming increasingly used in the popular culture and in mainstream media (see YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.). This is consistent with advocacy proponents such as Brawley (1997) and Brueggemann (2006), who have noted the importance of teaching students how to engage in advocacy efforts using media and technology.

Students were also required to develop an evaluation protocol for their advocacy efforts. Classroom discussions were held about how students could design their own evaluations in light of how they wanted to accomplish with their projects. In most cases, students decided to measure the effectiveness of their advocacy campaigns by assessing the number of persons that joined and participated in their social media sites. Given the time constraints of the course, students were allowed to use outputs in assessing effectiveness given the ease of collecting this type of data, but classroom discussions did talk about the limitations of using as proxies for outcomes.
The type of social interaction available through the use of social networking sites, as opposed to static websites, gave students an objective source of feedback on how advocacy strategies were received. For example, when students posted new content on their sites in the form of videos or photos, they could easily examine if their target audience made comments about the content. In this way, students were able to utilize real-time feedback to examine whether their advocacy efforts were receiving any reactions and share this feedback during dedicated class discussions throughout the semester. This then provided students the opportunity to receive feedback from their peers and the course instructors on whether they should make modifications in their approaches.

Qualitative feedback received during the last class session revealed differing perspectives on whether an advocacy assignment should have been included in the course as students in the macro-focused undergraduate course felt it should, while some students in the clinically-focused graduate course believed that an advocacy assignment more belonged in a macro course. While the latter sentiment of the some of the clinical students may be indicative of the claim made by Specht and Courtney (1994) that social work has lost sight of its historical mission of serving the less fortunate as it has increasingly focused on providing more clinically-based services, it was heartening that other clinical students recognized the need for all social workers to engage in advocacy efforts. Yet, the feedback indicated that if clinical students are not challenged in their courses to see advocacy as something that is also part of the clinical domain, the likelihood of them engaging in these efforts on their own when in professional practice was small.

Despite these differing viewpoints, feedback from students about the Social Work Advocacy Practice Model was generally positive. Undergraduate students thought the model helped them in their advocacy efforts and planned to use it again in the future. Graduate students thought it provided an easy-to-use framework to guide advocacy efforts and helped students to feel more empowered about engaging in advocacy. Salient quotes are provided below.

The model provides a framework for social workers to advocate for causes in a way that breaks down the steps and makes advocating easy.

Overall this advocacy project really opened my eyes up to how doable advocating for a cause is and how interesting it can really be.

Finally, one of the themes concerned learning from the successes and failures of initial advocacy efforts in order to become more effective advocates in the future. While numerous students identified some of the challenges in using a social networking site such as Ning, some students also reflected on what they learned from their experiences and what they planned to do differently in the future. According to one student:

I have learned that your work is never done and that your site is always a work in progress. I often found it hard to continually develop and improve my social networking site given how much time and effort is required in obtaining desired outcomes. Therefore, in continuing my efforts via social network sites in the future, I will have to not only learn more about various forms of multimedia content to incorporate into my site to engage and gain the interest of the targeted population, but I will also have to refrain from restricting access to the site, network, advertise, and designate the needed time and effort in successfully fulfilling my advocacy effort goals in the future.

DISCUSSION

This pilot test of the Social Work Advocacy Practice Model revealed three promising areas where advocacy in general, and the model in particular, could be utilized by social workers to effectively engage in more comprehensive and systematic advocacy efforts in their professional lives.
First, if writers such as Specht and Courtney (1994) are correct, the future of a more comprehensive embracing of advocacy by all social workers does not appear very promising as long as social workers are more interested in providing clinical services rather than addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. However, while it is easy to question the commitment of social workers to the profession’s historical mission of advocating for oppressed populations, social work education is at least partly at fault for this dilemma by not being more proactive in instilling in all social work students an advocacy ethic. While the inclusion of advocacy content to some degree is common in both undergraduate and graduate social work curricula, the failure to teach students how to develop, conduct, and evaluate comprehensive advocacy campaigns renders advocacy more as an afterthought or something someone else is responsible for doing, rather than a professional requisite for all social workers. This sentiment was reflected in the comments of some of the clinical students who felt that advocacy was something that macro social workers were supposed to do. Yet, not all of the clinical students felt this way – indicating that at least some of them may be open to seeing how engaging in advocacy efforts is consistent with their roles as direct service or clinical social workers. However, absent a more proactive approach by social work educators during the formative periods of social work students’ educations, this change in perspective is unlikely to occur. Fortunately, one of the major lessons learned in this study is that the model is a helpful tool that social work educators can use to help socialize all social work students to the importance of engaging in advocacy efforts.

Second, perhaps one of the challenges regarding some social workers has been, not so much to desire to engage in advocacy efforts as part of their professional identities as social workers, but to utilize a systematic framework to help guide them in the process of conceptualizing, operationalizing, implementing, and evaluating advocacy efforts. In this regard, student feedback indicated that the model was helpful. Given the sweeping changes in the political environment beginning in the 1980s that resulted in the trends of devolution, globalization, and privatization, the need for social workers to be more adaptable, and perhaps persuasive, in their advocacy efforts is even more pronounced.

Third, while classic advocacy tactics such as petitioning and protesting will remain as part of the repertoire of social work advocacy efforts, the emergence of multimedia technology from the Internet to blogs and social networking media has heralded an era when even individual or grassroots advocacy efforts now have the ability to reach and potentially influence large numbers of people. Yet, despite the allure of the seemingly unlimited potential this technology offers, a key lesson learned was that by requiring students to use social networking technology as the platform for their utilization of the model, many students, both clinical and non-clinical, then expressed an interest in learning more about advocacy, with the intention of continuing to engage in advocacy efforts in their professional lives. In effect, the creative inclusion of the kind of multimedia and digital technology that many students, whom Palfrey and Gasser (2008) call digital natives, grew up using as children and then as young adults, as a key component of advocacy efforts may have served to increase the interest of students in advocacy as a whole.

However, the usefulness of any practice model is ultimately determined in the field of practice – in this case, advocacy efforts by social workers. While student feedback from the pilot test was favorable, the next step in testing the Social Work Advocacy Practice Model needs to occur with practitioners in various settings in order to more fully assess its ease of use and ultimate effectiveness.

While the debate as to whether social work has lost sight of its historical mission may continue to go on, the changes in the political landscape since the 1980s necessitate the need for a more adaptable focus on conceptualizing and operationalizing advocacy efforts. The Social Work Advocacy Practice Model has promise to be a useful tool that social work educators can use to better prepare social work students to engage in more comprehensive advocacy efforts in their professional lives, and perhaps one that social work practitioners and administrators can use to help increase the likelihood of success of the advocacy efforts they engage in.
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