

Social Work Educators' Perceptions of Faith-Based BSW Programs: Ethical Inspiration and Conflicts

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Abstract

Although social work educators generally agree upon the importance of teaching spirituality and religion, there is significant contention about the place of religion within social work education. This study explores social work educators' perceptions of social work programs that follow a particular religious tradition. Educators from Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs across the United States were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the potential benefits and concerns regarding faith-based programs. The findings identified perceived benefits in relation to ethical inspiration, cultural competence, and preparation for certain types of practice. Common concerns were related to potential conflicts between religious beliefs and social work ethics. The study also indicated significant differences of opinion between educators from faith-based programs and non-faith-based programs. By identifying specific differences, it is hoped that BSW educators can move the discussion from making broad statements about the ethics of faith-based programs to a constructive dialogue about particular benefits and ethical concerns.

Keywords: faith-based, religion, social work education, ethical conflicts

1. Introduction

Among the 467 BSW programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), approximately 55% are situated in public colleges and universities, 35% are situated in private religion-affiliated institutions, and 10% are situated in private nonsectarian institutions (CSWE, 2012). Although social work educators generally agree that students should learn about religion (Furness & Gilligan, 2010), there is considerable controversy about the role of religion in social work education and the effects of BSW programs that integrate a particular religious tradition in their teaching of social work theory and practice (Williams & Smolak, 2007). This controversy was highlighted during the 2012 Baccalaureate Program Directors (BPD) Conference, when a number of social work educators discussed whether some faith-based BSW programs (FBPs) violated the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008) and whether they should be allowed CSWE accreditation.

The purpose of this survey research is to explore the perceived benefits and concerns regarding the role of spirituality and religion in the social work curriculum. The information gleaned from this study can be used to facilitate a better understanding of the views of educators from various types of institutions, and to encourage civil dialogue about the place of religion in social work education.

2. Literature Review

To foster understanding of the place or role of religion in social work education, it is important to define religion as well as related terms such as faith, spirituality, and sectarian. This literature review begins with a definitional framework followed by a discussion of ways that religion has been incorporated into social work programs that follow a particular religious tradition.

2.1 Definitional framework

Although spirituality, religion, faith, and sectarian are related concepts, each term has a distinct meaning. Spirituality refers to a search for meaning or process of transcendence beyond the material world. Spirituality may be experienced through relationships with self, others, a higher power, or the cosmos (Barker, 2007). Religion is a particular form of spirituality in which there is an organizational structure that provides social order, rituals, language, and shared understanding (Ai, 2002; Canda & Furman, 2009). Whereas spirituality may be experienced individually or with others, religion is experienced within a communal system (Van Wormer, 2010). Faith refers to a belief and trust in a higher power (Williams & Smolak, 2007). Thus faith is an integral aspect of religion. Sectarian refers to an affiliation with a particular group and is often used to describe affiliation with a particular religious group. Nonsectarian refers to institutions that are not affiliated with a particular religious group. For the purposes of this article, the term faith-based BSW programs (FBPs) is used to describe programs that integrate the values, beliefs, and traditions of a particular religion in their implicit and explicit curricula.

Annual statistics gathered by CSWE (2012) suggest 35% of social work programs are under the auspices of "private-religion-affiliated institutions." Although these 184 BSW programs are grouped together because of their institutions' religious affiliation, the roles of religion among these BSW programs may differ greatly. In some BSW programs, the social work department may be situated in a religiously affiliated college or university, but the program does not integrate the teachings and beliefs of a particular religion into the curriculum (Cecil and Stoltzfus, 2007). In others, the program may follow a particular religious tradition. In yet others, the program may follow a general religious tradition but it is not limited to a particular branch of the religion (e.g., Christian, rather than Baptist or Presbyterian). This study asked research participants for their views on social work programs that "follow a particular religious tradition." The rationale was to focus participants on the perceived benefits and concerns regarding programs that purposefully integrate a particular religious tradition in their curriculum and teaching.

2.2 Faith-based programs

While there is broad consensus among social work educators that BSW programs should include content on religion and spirituality (CSWE, 2008, Policy 2.1.4), there is significant difference of opinion about whether social work programs should integrate the tenets and traditions of a particular religion (Cnaan, Boddie, & Danzig, 2005). This section describes various approaches to faith-based programs as well as perceived benefits and concerns identified in the literature.

Some educators in FBPs suggest that incorporating religious teaching is intended to strengthen the social justice content of social work education (NASW, 2008, Standard 6.04). For instance, Brenden and Shank (2012) suggest that Catholic social teaching inspires students to fulfill social work values related to and respect for the dignity and worth of all people. Catholic social teaching provides students with a particular framework for defining social justice, which includes focus on the

common good and ensuring that the needs of the most vulnerable people in society are protected. Catholic social teaching suggests that government has a positive moral function. It also suggests that all Catholics have a stewardship role over God's creations. Cecil and Stoltzfus (2007) note that various branches of Christianity fit well with social work given their focus on resolving social injustice and other forms of human suffering. From the origins of social work in the 1800s to the current time, religion has acted as an inspiration for social work, including social advocacy (Barker, 2007; Netting, Thibault, & Ellor, 1990).

Among proponents of integrating faith in social work education, some believe that integration should be explicit and formal, using an explicit style. Others believe that the integration should be more implicit and subtle, using a demonstration style (Cecil & Stoltzfus, 2007). Educators using explicit approaches clearly identify that they are bringing the tenets, beliefs, rituals, worldview, and teachings of a particular religion into the teaching and learning processes (Scales & Kelly, 2008). Demonstrationists model and communicate the underlying values, beliefs, and teachings of the religion, but they do not identify these factors as particular to their own religion. Faith guides their teaching, even though they do not explicitly link their teaching to the Gospel or other religious scriptures.

Viewing social work as a vocation or spiritual calling, Sherr (2010) adopts an explicit approach:

I want [my BSW students] prepared and committed to their relationship to God, themselves, and others, and committed to the diligence it takes to be competent professionals to respond to the problems of the world that prevent every human being from living in right relationships. (p. 23)

In one of the most comprehensive books on Christian-based social work education, Sherr identifies seven core commitments for Christian educators:

1. Developing and maintaining a thorough knowledge of Scripture;
2. Living an active and consistent Christian life;
3. Spending time and energy getting to know students;
4. Supporting students while expecting academic excellence and challenging beliefs;
5. Having expertise and experience in one's curriculum areas of social work education;
6. Specifically integrating faith and learning experiences with curriculum material; and
7. Developing a classroom environment where students feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. (p. 18)

Given these commitments, Sherr (2010) suggests that educators should model Christianity inside and outside of class. He further suggests that educators should engage students in prayer, the study of scripture, and devotionals (inspirational readings). According to this framework, Christian values and beliefs are integrated into class discussions, assignments, role-plays, and field education. One of the suggested advantages of an explicit approach is that students and professors feel free to express their faith more freely (Cecil & Stoltzfus, 2007).

A demonstrationist integrates religion without specifically identifying the specific religious basis (Cecil & Stoltzfus, 2007). An educator can promote charity, good will, respect, and a commitment to social justice without referring to particular religious scriptures. An educator can model the teachings of Jesus, Moses, Buddha, Mohammed, or other religious figures without explicitly identifying them. Some educators who adopt a demonstrationist approach may be responding to concerns that incorporating religion more explicitly would be tantamount to sectarian indoctrination (Williams & Smolak, 2007). Others may be concerned that expressing religious beliefs might

be frowned upon by colleagues who perceive religion as contrary to the scientific and humanistic underpinnings of professional social work (Cnaan, Boddie, & Danzig, 2005).

In a qualitative study of students in Christian-based social work programs, Sherr, Huff, & Curran (2006) identified the following "salient indicators" of integrating faith and learning:

- Faculty relationships with God (i.e., faculty that demonstrated passion for their relationship with Jesus Christ, a commitment to develop that relationship over time, and a sense of accountability to the Lord)
- Faculty relationships with students (expressing sincere concern for students including spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being)
- Faculty competence in integrating faith and learning (using Scripture as a primary base of reference, assigning students in applying Christian beliefs in different settings, sharing personal faith integration experiences, and educating and confirming beliefs in absolute truths while also teaching students to appreciate diversity and different ideological views)
- Fostering a safe environment for the classroom (creating a culture that elicits feelings of belonging, acceptance, and commitment)

Although there is no research on which faith-based or faith-informed interventions are being taught in FBPs, Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert (1999) and Gilligan and Furness (2006) identified the following religiously sensitive interventions as being prevalent: gathered information about clients' religious or spiritual backgrounds; used or recommended spiritual books or writings; prayed privately for clients; prayed or meditated with clients; used religious or spiritual language or concepts; helped clients clarify their religious or spiritual values; recommended participation in

a religious or spiritual program; referred clients to religious or spiritual counselors; helped clients develop rituals as an intervention; participated in clients' rituals; shared worker's own religious or spiritual views or beliefs; recommended religious or spiritual forgiveness, penance or amends; performed exorcism or touched clients for healing purposes. Although the authors of both studies agree that religion should be covered in social work education, they also note there is significant debate about the content of what is taught, including which types of interventions.

Proponents of integrating faith and social work education suggest that faith-specific education prepares students for work in faith-based agencies (Cnaan, Boddie, & Danzig, 2005; Crisp, 2011). FBPs may attract students who want to work in faith-based agencies or who have prior affiliations with such agencies (Freeman, 2007). FBPs may provide students with a more in-depth education about the culture, religious beliefs, and values of those who come from the same religious background as that being taught in the program. While some FBPs focus on a particular religious background, proponents suggest that faith-based education also sensitizes students to the needs and concerns of people from all faith backgrounds (Streets, 2009). Proponents question whether secular social work programs devalue the importance of religion or make it difficult for students to discuss religion in their classes and assignments (Hodge, 2002; Sherr, 2010).

Some social work educators suggest that social work students should learn about clients' experiences of religion, but they should not be studying religion per se (Williams & Smolak, 2007). A primary concern raised by critics of FBPs is the potential conflict between religious values and beliefs and social work ethics. Religious values and beliefs may conflict with social work ethics in situations related to abortion, gay and lesbian clients, divorce, contraception, end-of-life decisions, and women's rights (Cnaan, Boddie, & Danzig, 2005; Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994). Some educators question whether faith-based education encourages students to place

their own religious beliefs over their professional obligations to clients. To impose religious beliefs on clients, however well intended, violates a client's rights to self-determination (Reamer, 2013, NASW, 2008, Standard 1.02). Some educators also question whether the focus on one religious tradition means that students will devalue the beliefs, values, traditions, or morals of people from different faith traditions and people who do not affiliate with any religion (Clark & Amato von-Hemert, 1994). If the teachings of a religion favor some groups or devalue others, faith-based education may conflict with ethical standards pertaining to discrimination and social justice (NASW, 2008, Standards 4.02 & 6.04(d)). Some educators are particularly concerned about social workers who embrace conservative or fundamentalist religions. Their concern is that such religions promote rigid thinking and a chauvinistic attitude toward people who do not share their religious beliefs or follow their teachings (Hunter, 2010). Some educators suggest that a pluralistic approach to incorporating religion may show the unique contributions of various religions to social work policy and practice (Netting, Thibault, & Ellor, 1990).

Educators who favor a secular approach may be concerned that FBPs encourage proselytizing and other professional boundary violations (NASW, 2008, Standard 1.06(b)). The concern seems to be that if social work educators pray, study religious texts, and apply religious teachings to practice, they are modeling similar practices for students to practice with clients. Some educators are concerned that a faith-based approach to social work goes against the principles of evidence-based practice, as professional decisions would be based on religious beliefs rather than empirical evidence (Jimenez, 2006). Social workers have an ethical duty to promote effective services (NASW, 2008, Standard 3.09(b)). Accordingly, educators should teach students to use critical thinking and science (rather than faith and religion) to determine the best services or interventions for a particular client (Cecil & Stotzfus, 2007). Advocates of secular social work education are not necessarily opposed to providing students with a better understanding of

religion. In fact, content on religion may be seen as a vital component of cultural competence (NASW, 2008, Standard 1.05(c); Streets, 2009).

As the forgoing discussion indicates, social work educators have diverse views on what faith-based education means. They also possess diverse views on the perceived benefits and concerns about faith-based education. Although existing literature identifies a range of these perceived benefits and concerns, no prior studies have identified the extent to which educators hold each of these views. This survey research was designed to fill this gap in the literature by exploring social work educators' perceptions of social work programs that follow a particular religious tradition.

3. Method

The authors developed an online survey based on their review of the benefits and concerns expressed in prior literature on the place of religion in social work education. The survey consisted of 14 closed-ended (Likert-type) questions. The questions solicited participants' demographic information and views about the benefits and concerns regarding BSW programs that followed a particular religious tradition. Among the 210 completed surveys from educators at BSW programs, the majority of respondents (n=151, 71.9%) identified as working at institutions that are not faith-based. The remainder of respondents identified as working at faith-based institutions (n=59, 28.1%).

The study population included educators from Bachelor of Social Work programs across the United States. The authors emailed invitations to the 1500-member listserv of the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD). The survey and consent form were approved by Florida Atlantic University's human subjects committee (Institutional Review Board). No social work programs were excluded from participating in the study. The consent form explained the nature of the study, the risks and benefits, time commitment to participate, the voluntariness of participation, and anonymity of responses. Recipients of the consent form were invited to indicate their acceptance of the terms of research by clicking a web-link to the survey.

Data analysis included descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions comparing the responses of participants from faith-based and non-faith-based programs. Chi square analysis was used to explore possible differences in responses between these two groups (Grinnell & Unrau, 2013).

4. Findings

Item frequencies for the 14 closed-ended questions are presented in Table 1. To facilitate analysis, the levels of “strongly disagree” and “disagree” were combined, and the levels of “agree” and “strongly agree” were combined. Among the perceived benefits of programs that follow a particular religious tradition, an overwhelming majority of participants (n=191; 91.0%) agreed

with the statement, “Social work is a pluralistic profession that should encourage people from different religious backgrounds to join the profession.” Another perceived benefit that received a high level of support was, “Students are able to express their religious beliefs in classes without fear of being silenced” (n=150; 71.4%). No other perceived-benefit items garnered agreement of more than 50% (the other items ranged from 23.8% to 46.3% agreement).

The most commonly held concern with programs that follow a particular religious tradition was that “Gay or lesbian students may feel excluded or demeaned by certain religious beliefs” (n=186; 88.6%). The second most common concern was “Religious teachings concerning condom use, end-of-life decision making, divorce, and/or abortion

TABLE 1
Frequencies for Perceived Benefits and Challenges

Item	Agree		Disagree		Uncertain	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<i>Perceived Benefits</i>						
1. Students can use religious scripture or teachings as a guide to practice.	83	39.5	101	48.1	25	11.9
2. Students will be better prepared to deal with clients with the same religious belief system that is taught in their BSW program.	68	32.4	91	43.3	46	21.9
3. Students are able to express their religious beliefs in classes without fear of being silenced.	150	71.4	34	16.2	22	10.5
4. Professors are able to express their religious beliefs in classes without fear of being rebuked.	99	46.3	74	34.6	38	17.8
5. Social work is a pluralistic profession that should encourage people from different religious backgrounds to join the profession.	191	91.0	3	1.4	8	3.8
6. Students may be better prepared for service within particular religious institutions.	79	37.6	61	29.0	65	31.0
7. Religious content in the program will inspire students to do good.	50	23.8	103	49.0	53	25.2
<i>Perceived Challenges</i>						
1. Social work mission, values, or ethics could be compromised by religious beliefs.	163	77.6	36	17.1	8	3.8
2. Social work interventions should be based on evidence-based practice rather than faith or religious beliefs.	166	79.0	18	8.6	23	11.0
3. Gay or lesbian students may feel excluded or demeaned by certain religious beliefs.	186	88.6	11	5.2	9	4.3
4. Religious teachings concerning condom use, end-of-life decision Making, divorce, and/or abortion may conflict with social work principles such as honoring client self-determination and not imposing values or beliefs on clients.	169	80.5	24	11.4	12	5.7
5. A social work program that follows a particular religious tradition may use religious teachings to discriminate against professors or students.	132	62.9	51	24.3	24	11.4
6. It is not possible for the program to adhere to the NASW Code of ethics.	40	19.0	124	59.0	43	20.5
7. These programs encourage students to impose their religious values and beliefs on clients.	45	21.4	96	45.7	65	31.

may conflict with social work principles, such as honoring client self-determination and not imposing values or beliefs on clients" (n=169; 80.5%).

Table 2 presents the test of association results of the chi-square analysis. These results indicate statistically significant differences between perceptions of participants from faith-based programs and those from non-faith-based programs. The type of program was a factor that affected four perceived benefits and four perceived challenges. One perceived benefit that showed a statistically significant difference could be seen with the statement, "Students are able to express their religious beliefs in classes without fear of being rebuked" ($X^2(3) = 19.31, p=.000$). More than 72% (n=109) of participants from FBPs agreed with this statement; in contrast, only 36% (n=21) from non-FBPs

agreed. A statistically significant difference was found in the following perceived challenge, "A social work program that follows a particular religious tradition may use religious teachings to discriminate against professors or students" ($X^2(3) = 31.95, p=.000$). More than 72% of participants from non-FBPs agreed with this statement and only 39% from FBPs agreed with this statement. The survey results included missing data due to nonresponse by some participants to particular questions. Although reporting the percentage of missing data for each item is ideal, space limitations make this impractical. Missing data ranged from 0.5% (for the possible benefit that "Students can use religious scripture or teaching as a guide to practice") to 3.8% (for the possible benefit that "Social work is a pluralistic profession that should encourage people from different religious backgrounds to join the profession").

TABLE 2
Results of Chi Square for Perceived Benefits and Challenges

Item	Faith-Based BSW Programs n=151			Non-Faith-Based BSW Programs n=59			χ^2
	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain	
<i>Perceived Benefits</i>							
1. Students can use religious scripture or teachings as a guide to practice.	69.5	25.4	5.1	27.0	57.0	14.6	31.01*
2. Students will be better prepared to deal with clients with the same religious belief system that is taught in their BSW program.	44.1	30.5	23.7	27.8	48.3	21.2	6.86
3. Religious content in the program will inspire students to do good.	39.0	42.4	16.9	17.9	51.7	28.5	10.93***
4. Students are able to express their religious beliefs in classes without fear of being silenced.	93.2	5.1	1.7	62.9	20.5	13.9	19.31*
5. Professors are able to express their religious beliefs in classes without fear of being rebuked.	72.9	20.3	6.8	36.4	39.7	21.9	23.38*
6. Social work is a pluralistic profession that should encourage people from different religious backgrounds to join the profession.	98.3	0.0	0.0	88.1	2.0	5.3	5.74
7. Students may be better prepared for service within particular religious institutions.	54.2	11.9	33.9	31.1	36.8	29.8	16.55**
<i>Perceived challenges</i>							
1. Social Work mission, values, or ethics could be compromised by religious beliefs, ideology, or zeal.	66.1	27.1	5.1	82.1	13.2	3.3	6.56
2. Social work interventions should be based on evidence-based practice rather than faith or religious beliefs.	76.3	10.2	11.9	80.1	7.9	10.6	.43
3. Gay or lesbian students may feel excluded or demeaned by certain religious beliefs.	83.1	11.9	3.4	90.7	2.6	4.6	7.33
4. Religious teachings concerning condom use, end-of-life decision making, divorce, and/or abortion may conflict with social work principles such as honoring client self-determination and not imposing values or beliefs on clients.	62.7	28.8	5.1	87.4	4.6	6.0	25.2*
5. A social work program that follows a particular religious tradition may use religious teachings to discriminate against professors or students.	39.0	50.8	8.5	72.2	13.9	12.6	31.95*
6. It is not possible for the program to adhere to the NASW Code of ethics.	3.4	86.4	8.5	25.2	48.3	25.2	26.80*
7. These programs encourage students to impose their religious values and beliefs on clients.	6.8	76.3	15.3	27.2	33.8	37.1	31.53*

* p = .000
 ** p = .001
 *** p = .01

4.1 Limitations

This study utilized self-administered survey responses. Accordingly, self-selection bias may be significant and influence the findings of the study. When interpreting the findings of this study, it is important to note that the questions were based on the perceptions of research participants rather than objective measures. For instance, statistics indicating concerns such as discrimination or bias within FBPs are based on the perceptions of educators who work in both faith-based and non-faith-based programs. One could question how educators from non-FBPs know whether these concerns truly exist in FBPs, or whether the views of educators from FBPs are somehow biased in favor of their programs. Future research could be designed with more objective measures comparing the benefits and concerns regarding programs that follow a particular religious tradition.

The response rate for this study presents a limitation in terms of the generalizability of the findings. Of the approximately 1500 members of the BPD-L email list, 210 completed the survey. The IULIST software for this list reports an error rate of 1.7% (Marshall L. Smith, personal communication, December 03, 2012). This left an effective response rate of 210 out of 1474.5 (14.2%). This rate is substantially lower than the mean response rate of 39.6% that Cook, Heath, and Thompson (2000) found in their meta-analysis of published research based on online surveys. The lower response rate in this survey could be explained by the nature of the BPD listserv, in which there are frequent requests for information and a significant number of members choose not to respond. The main concern about the response rate may be skewing among those who responded versus those who did not (Fowler, 2009). The survey drew representative numbers from both faith-based and non-faith-based programs; however, those who responded may have held stronger views on the place of religion in BSW education than those who did not respond.

5. Discussion: Implications and Conclusions

Prior debates about the appropriateness or value of having BSW programs that follow a particular religious tradition have often sparked intense disagreements and emotional responses. When people feel very strongly or embrace firm convictions about particular issues they may have difficulty engaging in civil conversations with people who express opposing opinions (Blankenhorn & Rauch, 2013). If an educator lacks doubt about the place of religion in social work education, that educator may not feel the need to discuss the issue with people who have differing views. Further, the educator may dismiss or demonize the other side (Barsky, 2014). In addition to responding to the closed questions, some research participants provided open-ended comments. The following comment highlights the challenge of opening dialogue when people feel very strongly:

With religious institutions that receive waivers from CSWE to allow them to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, religion, etc., I see no point in further discussions with them. For religious institutions that follow CSWE and NASW standards, I think they are the ones with whom we should dialogue. I do not think religious institutions who fail to follow CSWE and NASW code of ethics should be allowed to exist and I am not interested in their rationalizations.

The aim of this study was to discern specific differences in opinion about the benefits and challenges of faith-based programs. By identifying specific differences, it is hoped that BSW educators can move the discussion from making broad statements about the ethics or validity of faith-based programs and open a constructive dialogue about particular beliefs and concerns.

This study identified significant differences in opinion between educators from faith-based programs and non-faith-based programs. In terms

of benefits of FBPs, educators from FBPs were more likely to believe:

- Religious content inspires students to do good.
- Students and professors are able to express religious opinions without feeling rebuked.
- Students may be better prepared for service within particular religious institutions.

These statements suggest that educators from FBPs believe their programs have a number of advantages in terms of promoting ethical principles such as commitment to clients, commitment to social justice, respect for the dignity and worth of all people, and cultural competence (NASW, 2008).

With regard to concerns about FBPs, educators from non-FBPs were more likely to believe:

- Religious teachings concerning issues such as condom use, end-of-life decision-making, divorce, and abortion may conflict with social work principles.
- It is not possible for FBPs to adhere to the NASW code of ethics.
- These programs encourage students to impose their religious values and beliefs on clients.

These statements suggest that educators from non-FBPs have concerns about the ability of FBPs to deal with ethical issues related to client self-determination, respect for the dignity and worth of all people, and conflicts in values and beliefs (NASW, 2008).

To encourage constructive dialogue among educators, it would be helpful to focus on the potential benefits and ethical concerns identified in this study. Educators might ask, "How do we know whether religious content truly inspires social work students to do good," or "How do we know whether FBPs encourage students to impose their religious values and beliefs on clients?" Educators could then engage in discourse about whether their opinions are based on values, assumptions, beliefs,

personal experience, anecdotal information, or scientific inquiry (Barsky, 2010). If research-based evidence exists to support or reject any of these points, then educators should appraise the research and use it to help guide decisions about ethical compliance, accreditation of programs, curriculum design, and the manner in which religion is (or is not) brought into the social work education process. Given that most literature on faith-based education is descriptive or looks only at perceptions, it is likely that educators will need further research comparing the experiences and outcomes of faith-based and non-faith-based education. Understanding the impact of faith-based education on students has substantial implications not only for faculty and students, but for the clients and communities they will be serving. As a starting point for discussions, educators from both faith-based and non-faith-based programs may agree that the mandate of social work education is to prepare students for ethical, competent practice (CSWE, 2008). From there, the discussion could focus on determining which educational experiences promote such practice, and which ones may go against this goal.

In terms of curricula and educational experiences, there are significant differences among faith-based programs, and for that matter, among all BSW programs. In some FBPs, prayer in the classroom is encouraged; in others, prayer would be deemed inappropriate. As noted earlier, some faith-based educators favor an explicit style, whereas others favor a demonstrative style (Cecil & Stoltzfus, 2007). There may be some FBPs in which lesbian and gay students experience discrimination, just as there may be some non-FBPs in which they also experience discrimination. Conversely, there may be some non-FBPs that prepare students for work with particular religious communities just as effectively as certain FBPs. If an educator has concerns about how a particular program prepares social workers for practice within a particular religious community, then discussion could focus on what the program does to prepare its students and how they can determine whether the program is effective toward this end.

Some people question the academic rigor

of faith-based education (Cecil & Stotzfus, 2007). Rather than stereotype or make a blanket statement that all faith-based programs are inferior, educators need to consider the academic rigor of particular programs. One research participant issued the following statement:

The real problem here is that social work is a fluid process where ever-changing processes require new and innovative responses. Religious institutions are bound by rigid interpretations of static law and belief.

A faith-based educator reading this might react to such a statement in a defensive manner, feeling that the statement is ignorant or disrespectful. To engage in constructive dialogue, educators on all sides need to demonstrate interest in hearing one another's views, explore both differences and common ground, and strive toward better understanding and insight (Barsky, 2014). Why does this professor believe that faith-based programs are bound by static law? Is this a concern within FBPs, and if so, how do they deal with it? How can FBPs help students deal with potential conflicts between science-based and religious-based beliefs and interventions? How do FBPs deal with issues such as imposing values and beliefs on clients? How do non-FBPs ensure that students with strong religious convictions do not feel alienated or oppressed by professors or students? How do we know whether FBPs and non-FBPs are effective at dealing with each of these issues?

Moving forward, it is important to maintain open dialogue between social work educators, regardless of whether they take an evangelical, conservative, liberal, secular, humanistic, or other approach to teaching (Dessel, Bolen, & Shepardson, 2011). Educators should resist closing discussion on issues simply because such discussions might be difficult, emotional, or challenge core aspects of their religious and social identities. Rifts in social work education need to be healed through interaction between educators with differing views on social work ethics and values. By identifying a range of perceptions about the place of religious in

social work education, this article may serve as a starting point for discussion.

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