The Alternative to CSWE's Traditional Reaffirmation Process: One Small BSW Program's Experience

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The Council on Social Work Education's Commission on Accreditation approved a policy in 2004 that allows well-established social work programs the option to complete an alternative to the traditional self-study process. This alternative consists of the completion of a reaffirmation compliance audit and special project that is significant to social work or the program's specific goals and objectives. This article describes how one small BSW program successfully implemented the alternative process by completing a modified self-study, a new site visit protocol, and a three-phased project including a needs assessment, a seminar on conducting agency evaluations, and a collaboration with a local mentoring agency. Outcomes for community stakeholders, faculty, and students were positive; although requiring extensive resources, the alternative process was worthwhile. Based on their experience, the authors share suggestions for programs considering this option.

Keywords: *accreditation, reaffirmation, CSWE, social work education*

In October 2004 the Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation approved a policy that allows well-established and mature social work programs (at least in their 18th year of accreditation) the option to complete an alternative to the traditional self-study and reaffirmation process. The policy (updated in 2006) indicates that "the alternative to the traditional reaffirmation process is designed for programs with well articulated and stable curricula and would like to commit some of the resources they would normally use in the self-study process to different program improvement activities"

(Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation, 2006a). This alternative consists of two components: completion of a reaffirmation compliance audit that demonstrates program compliance with accreditation standards (i.e., an abbreviated self-study document) and a special project that is significant for the social work profession or germane to the program's goals and objectives. This article describes Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE's) Alternative Reaffirmation policy, details one small baccalaureate social work (BSW) program's experience implementing the new policy, and provides information on project outcomes and recommendations for other programs that may be considering this option.

Alternative Reaffirmation: Compliance Audit and Project Policy Overview

In the policy outlining the process and requirements for the alternative reaffirmation, the CSWE Commission on Accreditation (COA) (2006a) acknowledges that "a program commits its resources including time, money, faculty, and staff to the process of creating a self-study" (p. 1). Social work program directors and faculty know that considerable resources must be committed to the reaffirmation process. Some programs have mature and stable curricula that, when appropriately implemented, lead to evaluation data that demonstrates compliance with CSWE accreditation standards. The Alternative Reaffirmation process allows such programs to focus some of the energy and resources needed for the traditional self-study to a special project that would "produce a final product that would assist the profession to gain a deeper understanding of important issue(s) or concern(s)" (CSWE COA, 2006a, p. 3). Furthermore, the policy indicates that "projects may take different forms, such as a research effort, a demonstration project, or a legislative initiative" (p. 3).

To be eligible for the alternative reaffirmation, a project proposal must be submitted to and approved by the COA at least 2 years before the program's reaffirmation date. The COA reviews and takes action on the proposals at its February, June, and October meetings and makes one of three determinations. The first is to approve the proposal outright, whereby the program begins project implementation and completion of the reaffirmation compliance audit. The second decision defers the COA determination for one meeting because of insufficient documentation provided by the program. The program is then allowed to provide the needed documentation by the next meeting, when the determination will be made. The third outcome is denial of the proposal because of insufficient attention paid to the proposal guidelines set forth in the policy. The policy states that

> Denial of a proposal is an adverse decision and programs may request reconsideration [as outlined in the *Handbook*, 5th edition]. If the program accepts the COA's decision or the appeal is denied, it is required to complete the traditional self study. (CSWE COA, 2006a, p. 2)

The appendix provides the project guidelines as set forth in the CSWE Alternative Reaffirmation policy. The COA does not evaluate the completed project; once the proposal is approved, it is the program's responsibility to fully implement it. Compliance with accreditation standards is determined through the evaluation of the reaffirmation compliance audit, the review brief, the site visit, and the program response.

The reaffirmation compliance audit "consists of brief narratives, forms, and lists or copies of program documents" (CSWE COA, 2006a, p. 4). Programs that participate in this process complete the reaffirmation compliance audit, the reaffirmation compliance audit review brief (basically a detailed table of contents), and supporting documentation including course syllabi, college catalogue, student handbook, field manual, and other documentation that supports various accreditation standards. The policy provides an outline of required content for the reaffirmation compliance audit along with suggested page lengths for the narrative addressing each standard. As with the traditional self-study, all accreditation standards must be addressed, but the length of the written narrative is decreased as a result of suggested page limits and the cross-referencing of page numbers with existing documents as demonstration of standard compliance. The reaffirmation compliance audit, the audit review brief, and all supporting documentation are then submitted to the COA by the designated date. Based on the COA's review of these materials, directions are provided for the program's site visitor with specific instructions for the content of the site visit. The site visitor subsequently reports to the COA, and the program then has 2 weeks to respond in writing to the site visitor's findings. Two meetings later, the COA makes a decision regarding the program's reaffirmation status. The following sections discuss one small BSW program's experience implementing the alternative to the traditional reaffirmation.

One Small BSW Program's Experience with the Alternative to the Traditional Reaffirmation

Motivation to Undertake Alternative Option

In 2003, my second tenure-track year in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work at a small liberal arts college, I (first author) became the BSW program director. When I accepted these new administrative duties, I knew that reaffirmation was on the horizon in 2006. I had learned of the alternative to the traditional reaffirmation from an informational session hosted at CSWE's Annual Program Meeting, and my interest was piqued. The timing of my administrative appointment and this new policy coincided with a budget "crisis" at my institution, serious discussions regarding the college's new strategic plan that was slated for faculty approval in 2004, and plans to develop a center for civic engagement at the college to promote service learning and collaborative research. Given these contextual factors, I saw the

alternative project as a means to make the social work program more visible, valuable, and relevant to the college's mission. Given the stability of the program's curriculum and existing evaluation data indicating that goals and objectives were satisfactorily being met, an abbreviated self-study that would allow some energy and resources to be focused on building bridges between the program, the college, and larger community was in order. With support from the dean of faculty's office and our multidisciplinary department, a proposal was submitted to CSWE for the alternative to the traditional reaffirmation process in 2004. The project, "Enhancing College-Community Collaboration: A Proposal to Promote Community-Based and Action Research in Local Human Services Agencies," was developed and implemented in collaboration with the second author from the sociology program.

Proposal Description and Approval Process

As previously indicated, numerous factors influenced the decision to undertake the alternative to the traditional reaffirmation and complete a project that focused on building collaborative relationships between the college and the local human service agency community, which was the focus of the new strategic plan. The strategic plan consists of four broad goals, one of which is to "prepare every Skidmore student to make the choices required of an informed, responsible citizen at home and in the world" (Engaged Liberal Learning, 2004). One of the priority initiatives linked to this goal is to "develop, broaden, and deepen the College's connection to the local community." We saw this as an opportunity to capitalize on the social work program's strengths (e.g., existing community connections) and to make the program more visible and relevant vis-à-vis institutional goals and increased college emphasis on service learning, an important component of the proposed center for civic engagement.

The focus of the special project was to enhance college–community partnerships between the institution and local human services agencies. The project had the following objectives: (1) foster existing and develop new partnerships between the college and local human services agencies; (2) identify a variety of settings for service learning, collaborative research, and field education opportunities for students; (3) promote interdisciplinary research at the college; (4) assist community agencies in evaluating the effectiveness of their service provision to promote evidence-based practice and provide faculty and students with opportunities to participate in community-based research; (5) contribute to the social work knowledge base through manuscripts developed from collaborative research projects; (6) increase the visibility and legitimacy of the social work program in the college community; and (7) help to develop the foundation for a center for civic engagement and community research (see Table 1). These objectives were met through a three-phased process that included (a) community partner identification and needs assessment; (b) the training of community partners in action and evaluation research techniques; and (c) consultation

with an identified community partner to implement an evaluation research plan developed during the training phase.

In accordance with CSWE's Alternative Reaffirmation policy, the proposal was submitted in 2004, 2 years before the program's reaffirmation date. CSWE COA responded to the proposal with a letter requesting (1) a letter of intent

Table 1   Alternative project objectives and outcomes

Project Objective	Outcome
Foster existing and development of new partnerships between the college and local human services agencies	Participants from local human service agencies positively evaluated seminar experience and expressed interest in follow-up meetings; two additional training meetings were held and plans are being developed for an ongoing quarterly meeting for local agencies; at least three new agencies were identified for service learning and field practicum sites
Identify a variety of settings for service learning, collaborative research, and field education	Through the seminars and needs assessment, additional agencies were added to our community partners list for potential collaborations in the future
Promote interdisciplinary research at the college	The needs assessment was an example of interdisciplinary research conducted as a result of the project; more administrative infrastructure is needed to fully realize this objective
Assist community agencies in evaluating the effectiveness of their service provision and provide faculty and students with opportunities to participate in community-based research	Community agencies reported that the evaluation seminar helped them to better conceptualize their evaluation plans; ongoing evaluation research with the mentoring program is underway; another community agency that participated in the evaluation seminar plans to partner with students and faculty to conduct a community needs assessment
Contribute to the social work knowledge base through manuscripts developed from collaborative research projects	This manuscript is the first to result from the project; the mentoring program has expressed interest in writing up the findings from their evaluation for publication
Increase the visibility and legitimacy of the social work program in the college community	The social work program director was invited to participate in numerous campus-wide initiatives that promote service learning and collaborative research; the social work field coordinator was invited to lead an effort to develop a service learning component for the college's 1st year experience
Develop the foundation for the development of a center for community research	Efforts led by the second author continue to make this an attractive option for investment by the administration

from one of our community partners indicating that they work with us in implementing their evaluation plan, and (2) that the program seriously consider obtaining a consultant on community-based research to assist with the project. An agency with which the program had a longstanding relationship was selected to implement the evaluation research project, and its staff quickly provided a letter of intent. An expert in campus–community partnerships was identified with the assistance of the second author, and he agreed to consult with us. Additional funding was requested from and provided by the dean of faculty's office for the consultant and other project costs. Subsequently, the letter of intent from the agency and the plan for consultancy were shared with CSWE COA via official letter. Once this information was received, the program was notified by CSWE that the project had been approved and implementation activities could commence.

Project Implementation and Reaffirmation Compliance Audit Completion

Phase I of the project (needs assessment) was conducted during the 2004–2005 academic year. The second author and students enrolled in his sociological methods course conducted a needs assessment of faculty, students, and community agencies on civic engagement activities at the college (defined as service learning activities, community-based research projects, and volunteer work). All three stakeholder groups were surveyed. One-hundred eleven randomly selected students (response rate of 53%) and 126 faculty (52% of all voting-eligible faculty members) responded anonymously to an online survey. Twenty-three local human service agencies from a sampling frame of 63 (response rate of 37%) were interviewed by phone. Findings that were most relevant to the objectives of the alternative project indicated that (1) 81% of agencies surveyed were interested in collaborating on community-based research initiatives; (2) of the 11% of students who had participated in community-based research activities while in college, 100% were satisfied with the experience and 68% were interested in taking part in such an experience in the future; and (3) 59% of faculty were interested in working on community-based research activities, and 63% supported the development of a community-based research center at the college. Based on these data, we concluded that stakeholders saw a need for more community-based research opportunities that linked the academy and the broader community.

Phase II of the project, a seminar designed to help human service agencies develop and implement viable evaluation research plans, was implemented in the summer of 2006. Previously identified community partners were invited to participate in a free 1-day seminar that addressed evaluation logic models, development of useful and "doable" evaluation plans, and strategies to promote partnership between and among the college and local human services agencies. The content of the seminar was developed in collaboration with the consultant hired to assist with the project, who was an expert in community-based and

evaluation research. Representatives from 11 agencies attended the workshop that the authors facilitated. Evaluations on the workshop content and experience were overwhelmingly positive, and all agencies expressed a strong interest in future collaborations. (Specific information regarding workshop format and content is available from the first author.)

The final phase of the project involved assisting a selected human service agency in implementing their evaluation plan. This agency was a small mentoring program with which the social work program had a longstanding relationship. During the spring of 2007, the director of the mentoring program worked with the first author and her social work research methods students to further develop and subsequently implement part of the agency's evaluation plan. The mentoring program director spoke to the research methods class on two occasions to provide context and information needed for the evaluation. In consultation with the mentoring program director, various student teams wrote proposals to evaluate aspects of the mentoring program, and one of the strongest proposals was chosen for implementation. This proposal examined the impact of the mentoring program on student academic achievement, one of the agency's main outcome variables. Through a one-group, pretest posttest design, educators of students enrolled in the mentoring program were sent follow-up questionnaires about the students' academic achievement since being enrolled in the program (baseline data had been collected by the program when the students were initially enrolled in the mentoring program). Findings suggested that mentoring was associated with academic gains in math and reduced absenteeism. Findings from the research were used by the mentoring program in grant proposals requesting increased program funding to widen the scope of the program's impact.

While the various project phases were being implemented, the reaffirmation compliance audit was completed. As with all self-study processes, this necessitated a thorough examination of the program's curriculum, evaluation data, and supporting material in light of CSWE accreditation standards. The alternative reaffirmation policy states that all accreditation standards must be addressed in the audit although some are explained through limited narrative and others are demonstrated by reference to the program's supporting materials. Although all programs will vary, this program produced a 121-page document (discounting syllabi, handbooks, and manuals) for the self-study.

These materials were sent to CSWE in December of 2006, and the site visit was scheduled for March 2007. Also in 2006, CSWE COA adopted a Revised Self-Study Review and Site Visit Protocol, and our institution was the first to be reviewed under this new protocol. The new policy states:

We have elected to modify the current procedure such that the self-study is first reviewed by the COA and depending upon its findings, the COA develops guidelines for the site visit such that the team's activities are more narrowly focused and guided by the insights of the initial COA review. At a

minimum, site teams will review three standards: AS 1 (program mission, goals and objectives), AS 8 (educational outcome assessment and continuous improvement), and AS 6 (nondiscrimination and human diversity). Beyond these, only the areas about which the COA has raised questions will be studied by the site team during its visit. (CSWE COA, 2006b, p. 1)

Once the reaffirmation compliance audit is reviewed by the COA, the commissioners write a letter to the site visitor with specific instructions about which aspects of the program need attention and further explanation. This communication is also copied to the program in question at the same time. In our situation, the site visitor was instructed to (1) clarify the field manual citations that addressed AS 2.1.1–2.1.6 (Field Instruction); (2) discuss the assigned time for the program director (AS 3.0.4) to consider specific aspects of the program's learning context, especially as they relate to persons who are lesbian or gay (AS 6.0); and (3) clarify the past MSW practice experience of all faculty who teach practice (AS 4.3). This allowed the program faculty to examine the COA's concerns in advance and to be prepared to respond to the site visitor about these issues.

The alternative reaffirmation policy indicates that the site visitor(s) complete the review brief that summarizes the site visit findings; the program then has 2 weeks to provide the COA with a response. In our case, the site visitor completed his review brief before he departed our campus, and our response was completed the same day he left. As with the traditional self-study, the COA can make one of four decisions based on the alternative reaffirmation: (1) reaffirm for 8 years; (2) reaffirm for 8 years with a progress report (reviewed by the accreditation specialist, the COA, or a combination of the two); (3) place the program on conditional accredited status; or (4) initiate withdrawal of accredited status. We were notified a few months later that we had been reaffirmed for 8 years with no other documentation required.

Outcomes, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Overall, we see our social work program's participation in the alternative reaffirmation as a success. Table 1 lists the original objectives and attained outcomes of the project. Without the opportunity to complete the alternative project, our efforts at intentionally and systematically reaching out to the local human services community most likely would not have occurred while we were engaged in completing the program's self-study. The alternative project as a component of reaccreditation gave us legitimacy with and support (i.e., funds and time) from the administration. We do not think the college administration would have supported such a project so readily without a link to the necessary process of reaffirmation.

This process had an overall positive outcome on our program stakeholders. Program faculty were excited by the prospect of an endeavor that would help

to nurture and sustain the relationships between the program and our community partners as well as to identify new agencies with whom to work. Program faculty took meaningful roles in implementing the meetings with community partners and reported that these activities were energizing. As a result of the project, students benefited from increased opportunities to link their academics with the challenges faced by agencies, particularly in the research arena, which is one component of the curriculum with which students can have difficulty engaging. Students found more meaning in the research concepts presented in class when they could ground their discussions in the actual evaluation needs presented by the director of the mentoring program. The students were able to see the importance of their work when the mentoring program director shared with them that the results of their study would be used in grant applications.

For programs considering implementing the alternative to the traditional reaffirmation, it is important that they have buy-in from faculty who will be involved with the project and support from the administration to ensure that the needed resources to promote project success will be provided. Given that our program is so small, there were only a few faculty members involved in project implementation; agreeing upon the project parameters and implementation strategy was a relatively painless process. For larger faculties, this may be more complicated and should be a factor in a program's decision-making process to undertake the alternative reaffirmation. Even under this new policy, the self-study process and completion of the reaffirmation compliance audit are still time-consuming and resource intensive. Programs need to understand that considerable work will still go into demonstrating compliance with the accreditation standards. The alternative reaffirmation requires extensive resources; for our program, it was beneficial to use some of those resources not only to thoroughly examine our curriculum and student outcomes, but also to focus some needed attention on our community stakeholders. Students continually indicate in their teaching evaluations that their experiences in the field, service learning, and volunteer placements are some of the most valuable aspects of our program. This project helped to promote continued quality improvement in this program component by strengthening ties between the agencies and the institution and providing continuing education for human services professionals with whom our students work.

Although CSWE's alternative reaffirmation was adopted in 2004, at this writing only a few programs have taken advantage of this option. According to CSWE's (2008) Web site, the most recently approved proposal is from the graduate school of the University of Denver, and their faculty will complete a project "that will focus on distance education and the elements needed for developing effective blended social work education" (Faculty of the Graduate School of the University at Denver, 2007). Employing a series of three empirical studies, the program will produce a book manuscript based on their final report. The University of Michigan's project, "Promoting Socially-Just Practice

in the Field," was approved in 2005 and consists of implementing "three in-structional methods in a series of five pilot projects embedded in varied field settings" (University of Michigan School of Social Work, 2005). Materials developed from the studies will be made available on the school's Web site. Finally, in 2004 (the same year our project was approved), the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee began their project, "Curriculum Materials for the Integration of Alcohol Use Disorders Content into Generalist BSW Education," which involved the development of curriculum materials to "improv[e] the capacity of social work educators to train their generalist BSW students for professional practice with clients who have alcohol-related problems" (2004). Materials developed from the project were distributed via their Web site, cur-riculum workshops at professional conferences, and CDs mailed directly to BSW program directors.

As can be seen by this brief description, the scope and focus of these alter-native projects vary widely. All of the approved proposals (including ours) can be accessed on CSWE's (2008) Web site. According to Dr. Dean Pierce, director of the Office of Social Work Accreditation and Educational Excellence, as of the October 2007 COA meeting 13 programs have applied for approval to com-plete an alternative reaffirmation project and reaffirmation compliance audit. Two proposals have been denied, 8 have been approved, and 3 are under con-sideration. Of the 8 that have been approved, 3 have been completed (D. Pierce, personal communication, November 12, 2007).

Based on our experience, we would like to offer these suggestions for pro-grams considering this option. The alternative reaffirmation is truly for mature programs with stable curricula. The implementation of an approved project while simultaneously completing the self-study is not recommended for pro-grams that are experiencing or anticipating serious changes in faculty compo-sition, leadership, or curricula. This caution is offered because of the required resources and focus necessary to successfully implement a self-study and com-plete a major project; engaging in these activities while attempting to negotiate far-reaching changes in the academic landscape would be difficult at best. Stakeholder buy-in is also integral to success; not every partner must be inten-sively involved and completely committed to the project, but, at a minimum, role clarification of faculty, administrators, and agency personnel in the process needs to be made explicit at the outset. To ensure satisfactory project comple-tion, partners must also commit to fulfilling their explicit roles over time. Ensuring that there is adequate support from administration is vital for the pro-ject's success so that needed resources are available. It is important to pick a project that meets program needs and fits within the conceptualization of the program's mission and goals. The project needs to be seen as a means to propel the program forward and to contribute to the larger profession of social work. It is not a way to decrease the amount of work that occurs during reaffirmation.

Finally, we would like to commend CSWE for its creativity and openness in offering an alternative to the traditional reaffirmation and for streamlining the

site visit process. As a social work program in a small liberal arts environment, our discipline tends to be misunderstood, and this project helped the campus community better understand how our program uniquely contributes to the college mission. In addition, our administration historically has not understood the purpose of reaffirmation and why it takes so much time and so many resources. Implementing our project produced a "product" that has value to the administration and broader institution—namely, increased collaborations with the community. Our project outcomes and CSWE's move to streamline the site visit process helped our administration see that the self-study process can indeed be valuable, regenerative, and also manageable.

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Appendix

CSWE's Alternative Reaffirmation: Guidelines for Project

A program's area of focus should be broad in scope; related to the program's mission, goals, and objectives; and designed to produce a final product that would assist the profession to gain a deeper understanding of important issue(s) or concern(s). Projects may take different forms, such as a research effort, a demonstration project, a conference, or a legislative initiative. The following components should be included.

I.   Summary: A summary of the program's accreditation history
II. Purpose: The program should include
    a. discussion of the problem or issue to be explored;
    b. a review of the literature across disciplines;
    c. proposed study objectives discussed in terms of measurable outcomes; and
    d. potential utility or relevance of exploring the issue(s) to the program, to social work education, and to the profession as a whole.
III. Methodology: The program should provide a detailed description of
    a. components of the proposed project including what kinds and the extent of data to be collected;
    b. external expertise or other outside resources to be accessed;
    c. faculty and special resources available within the program and institution to complete the proposed project;
    d. methodology used to collect and analyze the data;
    e. timeline of steps to be accomplished and when outcomes are to be expected; and
    f. Funding sources as well as the fiscal and technological, and human resources required to complete the study.
IV. Documentation of project format and dissemination plan
    a. To meet approval expectations, the project proposal must detail the character, format, and scope of the final product (i.e., written reports, conferences or conference presentations, organizational activities, on-going special projects, social action effort).
    b. The program must document that it has secured institutional human subjects approval, when appropriate, and list sanctions, permissions, or institutional access approvals that are required at its institution.
    c. The proposal should detail how outcomes will be disseminated and how interested parties can access the finished product (e.g., Web site, contact person.)
V.   Evaluation: The program should discuss its evaluation plans.

From *Alternative reaffirmation: Compliance audit and project,* by the CSWE COA, 2006a, pp. 3–4.