The Five Year BSW—MSW Program: a New Curriculum Option

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The 5-Year BSW–MSW Program: A New Curricular Option

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This article describes and analyzes the development and implementation of a 5-year BSW–MSW program at a Midwestern school of social work. Key pedagogical and programmatic considerations in the development of such programs are identified. Specific information about the admission process and curricular pathway is provided. Five-year and traditional MSW students are compared on their performance in foundation-level MSW courses. The results of evaluative surveys of faculty members and 5-year students are also presented. The potential role of 5-year programs in social work education is discussed.

Keywords: social work education, advanced standing, 5-year program, accelerated MSW program, BSW–MSW program continuum

In 1978 the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) approved an advanced-standing option whereby students with a bachelor’s degree in social work (BSW) could complete their master’s degree in social work (MSW) in less than 2 years (Aguilar, Brown, Cowan, & Cingolani, 1997). Although policies and procedures differ significantly across programs, advanced standing generally means that a student can accrue credit hours toward the MSW degree based on earning a BSW degree from a CSWE-accredited program and meeting program-specific MSW admission criteria. The credit hours usually can be applied to the foundation year of a standard 2-year MSW degree program. This option allows students with these credentials to complete an MSW degree in significantly less time than the traditional 2 years.

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Advanced standing has become a widely accepted and valued pathway to the MSW degree with most MSW programs offering an advanced-standing option (Aguilar et al., 1997; Bremner & Zastrow, 2008). In a 2004 national survey of CSWE-accredited MSW programs, Bremner and Zastrow (2008) found that all but 13 (11%) of the 117 responding schools (79% of all MSW programs) had an advanced-standing option. Additionally, of the 13 that did not, 4 were considering initiating such a program. Bremner and Zastrow go on to note that, overall, in the past decade there has been an 8% increase in the number of advanced-standing programs.

Advanced standing’s appeal resides in its ability to address three significant factors: redundancy, cost of graduate education, and schools’ marketing and recruitment competitiveness. In the continuum of social work education, CSWE has long been concerned with redundancy in BSW and MSW education. Advanced standing addresses this issue by eliminating the repetition in the MSW foundation-year curriculum for BSW graduates. Second, by decreasing the number of credit hours needed to earn an MSW degree, advanced standing reduces the out-of-pocket expenditures for students and their families. This makes an MSW degree more attractive and affordable in these uncertain economic times. With the spread of advanced-standing programs, an institution that does not offer this option severely curtails its marketing and recruitment efforts, and jeopardizes its ability to reach the large pool of BSW graduates.

**Literature Review**

The social work literature contains a number of articles discussing the value and effectiveness of advanced standing (Aguilar et al., 1997; Bremner & Zastrow, 2008; Carrillo & Thyer, 1994; Knight, 1993; Hepler & Noble, 1990; Raymond & Atherton, 1991; Richman & Rosenfeld, 1988; Siegel & Baskind, 1990; Thyer, Vonk, & Tandy, 1996; Weinbach, 1999). Although most articles indicate little or no significant difference in performance between advanced-standing students and traditional MSW students (Bremner & Zastrow, 2008; Carrillo & Thyer, 1994; Knight, 1993; Richman & Rosenfeld, 1988; Thyer et al., 1996), questions and concerns remain about the impact and effectiveness of advanced standing. Vinton (1999) argues that advanced-standing programs should be abolished because of their divergent policies, admission criteria, and course equivalency procedures. Consistency in the amount of course credit awarded, the need for additional courses that bridge the perceived gap between the BSW degree and the 2nd year of the MSW program, and the smooth orientation and integration of advanced-standing students into the MSW student body are additional concerns. Based on a survey of MSW programs offering advanced standing, Aguilar and colleagues (1997) call for national standards to address these issues. However, Bremner and Zastrow (2008) conclude that “given the current philosophy that emphasizes out-
comes and reduced requirements, it is unlikely that any prescriptive national guidelines on advanced standing will emerge” (p. 115). In addition, despite CSWE oversight of BSW education and the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), there is great variability in the theoretical emphasis and practice orientation of BSW programs (Aguilar et al., 1997). Without the orientation implicit in an MSW foundation year, there may be issues of fit for the advanced-standing student in a particular program.

An alternative accelerated educational option is the 5-year program, which typically allows students to pursue a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in the same field in an abbreviated time period at the same institution. It differs from advanced standing in that students must complete their undergraduate and graduate work at one academic institution. Although there is anecdotal evidence that 5-year programs exist in fields such as nursing, business, and medicine, there is a paucity of scholarly literature regarding such programs. Nursing has some citations referring to its 5-year programs as accelerated nursing programs (Bentley, 2006; Cangelosi & Whitt, 2005; Wink, 2005). Wink (2005) indicates that these varied curricular options enable individuals with non-nursing degrees to more easily pursue an advanced degree in nursing. Cangelosi and Whitt (2005) state that accelerated nursing programs have grown rapidly in response to the nursing shortage, with 133 such programs in 2005 and 50 more in the planning stage. In an extensive study comparing traditional and accelerated nursing graduates, Bentley (2006) finds that “the accelerated graduate is just as successful as, and more often more successful than, the traditional student” (p. 82).

Within the social work literature, there is little discussion of 5-year programs. Kadushin and Kelling (1977) compared students admitted to graduate school after 3 years of undergraduate education and found that on 92 of 98 specific measures of social work knowledge, values, and skills, there were no significant differences between the accelerated program and the traditional MSW program. Siegel and Baskind (1990) state: “For those who are interested in a professional ‘fast track,’ a BSW-MSW format taken in the same school within five years may be a way to resolve the issue of academic repetition” (p. 55).

To determine whether 5-year programs were more common than the literature indicated, an online review of all CSWE-accredited, combined BSW-MSW programs was conducted. The Web sites of all combined programs were reviewed to identify any program that offered a 5-year BSW–MSW option in some configuration. Only two such programs were found, one of which was offered at the authors’ home institution. The other program was also located in a private university in the Midwest, but had a more informal structure, responding to student interest on a case-by-case basis.

This article describes and analyzes the development, implementation, and progression of a 5-year BSW–MSW program. Key considerations in the development of such programs are identified. To address questions about the ability
of BSW students to succeed in master’s-level classes while still enrolled in undergraduate programs, 5-year students and traditional MSW students are compared on their performance in four required foundation-level MSW courses. The results of evaluative surveys of faculty members and 5-year students are also discussed. The potential role of 5-year programs in social work education is described.

The 5-Year Program

Educational Rationale

The rationale for developing a 5-year program was both pedagogical and programmatic. The main pedagogical rationale was the elimination of redundancy. In MSW programs that offer advanced standing, redundancy is addressed by awarding credit for the BSW degree to select incoming MSW students. These programs regard the academic and fieldwork requirements of the BSW program as essentially equivalent to the foundation content of the MSW degree. CSWE views the BSW program and the foundation year of the MSW as generalist in nature and focus. Furthermore, the recently revised EPAS standards (CSWE, 2008) indicate that the competency outcomes for BSW graduates and MSW students in the foundation year are equivalent. Therefore, with regard to the specific 5-year program under discussion, it made pedagogical sense to allow BSW students in their final year to begin taking foundation-level MSW courses. This “seamlessness” between the two degree programs was a key piece of the overall conceptualization in developing the 5-year program.

A second key pedagogical factor addressed one weakness of traditional advanced-standing programs. Advanced-standing students usually come from a range of BSW programs where the goals, objectives, and curricular content may vary greatly (Bremner & Zastrow, 2008). The faculty members who teach and work with students in the 5-year BSW–MSW program are already familiar with these students’ BSW program. They know the program’s goals, objectives, and curricular content, and thus both faculty members and 5-year students have a potential advantage in the classroom over the typical advanced-standing students.

The programmatic rationale for the 5-year program was based on two interrelated issues—economic factors and student retention. The cost of higher education is a key issue for students and their families. This is especially true for social work students who may face significant college debt as well as the prospect of working in an often underfunded profession. The 5-year program was conceptualized as a means for potential students and their families to develop a clear, predictable financial and academic plan culminating in an MSW degree. It also allows students and their families to work with a single institution and become familiar with its financial awards, forms, and bureaucracy, as opposed to learning an entirely new system at a different institution.
Student retention was another factor motivating the development of the 5-year program. From an institutional standpoint, retaining students for 5 years is far better than nurturing them for 4 years only to lose them to another institution for their graduate degrees. In addition, faculty members believed that the BSW program would provide ample opportunity to observe and become acquainted with students before their admission into the MSW program. Thus, the potential 5-year students are known entities, and the faculty can better manage professional gatekeeping functions, “counseling out” students who may not be a good fit for the MSW program. Faculty members also value the opportunity to work with and get to know high-caliber students across their BSW and MSW degree programs.

The pedagogical and programmatic rationales speak to the strengths of developing such a program. However, the authors recognize the concerns about the potential for “programmatic inbreeding.” Students in a 5-year program may be exposed to the same orientation and faculty over the course of their BSW and MSW programs. It is possible that these students could gain a more diverse social work perspective by exposure to different faculty members and programs with potentially differing programmatic foci and outcomes. Conscious efforts to acquaint students with a broad array of orientations and perspectives could help alleviate such a concern.

Program Development

The 5-year BSW-MSW program option was initiated in 2002 as a result of the faculty and administration’s concern that many of the top BSW students were attending other schools for their MSW. Faculty members frequently nurtured excellent undergraduate social work students only to end up writing reference letters for these students to attend other graduate social work programs. Discussions with students revealed the primary reason for their decision was financial—they could not afford graduate tuition at a private institution in addition to their expenditures for their undergraduate degree.

As the BSW faculty members and program director discussed implementing the 5-year program with the school’s faculty members, a number of concerns were raised. First, there was some resistance to the idea of BSW seniors taking classes with 1st-year MSW students. Some faculty members were concerned that such an arrangement would require changing the structure and content of the foundation MSW courses. Second, the school had a strong history and focus on clinical social work in the MSW program. Some faculty members were concerned that BSW students, generally younger and less experienced, would be unable to manage the demands of MSW coursework. As a result of these concerns, the program proposal presented to the faculty for approval included stringent criteria for admission into the 5-year program. It also contained a built-in evaluation component to determine whether any of the expressed concerns were valid.
After the faculty approved the 5-year program, the university’s program oversight committee and provost approved it. When the approval process was complete, academic advisers began informing students of this new option. A handout describing the program was distributed, and information was posted on the school’s Web site. In addition, the marketing department created and distributed a brochure describing the new option. The BSW director also discussed the 5-year program and its requirements in all sections of the introductory social work course.

The 5-year program was approved during the 2002 academic year. The first cohort (in academic year [AY] 2003) was composed of two students. Cohorts for each of the following academic years generally increased, although there was a decline in AY 2007 from the previous year (see Table 1). The AY 2006 group was quite large, and there was concern about adherence to admission standards that year. When these concerns were subsequently addressed, the result was a somewhat smaller group admitted the following year (AY 2007).

### Table 1  Admissions into the 5-year program: Fall 2004 through fall 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Number Admitted</th>
<th>Number Who Completed Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004–05</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005–06</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006–07</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–08</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008–09</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aTwo students who began the program in 2005–06 left after graduating from the BSW program.
bOne student, after beginning courses in the 5-year program, elected to enter the master’s program as an advanced-standing student instead of completing the 5-year program.
cOne student admitted this year left after graduating from the BSW program. Another elected to enter as an advanced-standing student and left the 5-year program.
dTwo students admitted in 2008–09 deferred their admission. They began taking courses in the program in fall 2009.

Structure and Format

Admission process and criteria  By the time students take the first introductory social work course during their freshman or sophomore year, they have learned about the 5-year program option. Students apply for the 5-year program by January 31 of their junior year and, if accepted, are allowed to enroll in a number of graduate courses during their senior year. These students are not accepted into the MSW program during their senior year. Admission to the MSW program occurs when the student completes the BSW degree and meets all admission requirements for the MSW program.
Clarifying the distinction between the 5-year program student and the advanced-standing student was critical to the success of both programs. It was important for faculty, staff, administration, and potential students to understand that the 5-year program:

- only accepts BSW students from the home institution, whereas advanced standing is open to BSW graduates from all CSWE-accredited schools;
- does not ask students to take the two summer courses required of advanced-standing students at the authors’ home institutions; and
- provides clarity, direction, and professional opportunities for students early in their undergraduate education.

Specific admission criteria to the BSW-MSW 5-year program include the following:

- current enrollment as a BSW student at the home institution
- minimum GPA of 3.0;
- completion of the majority of core/general education requirements;
- three letters of reference with at least one reference from a full-time BSW program faculty member;
- volunteer/work experience comparable to that expected in the MSW program; and
- personal statement of career goals and aspirations.

**Curricular structure of the 5-year program**  After admittance to the 5-year BSW–MSW program, each student is advised about the specific curricular requirements. The program allows substitution of certain MSW courses for BSW requirements, as well as substitution of specific previously completed BSW courses for MSW requirements, thus providing an accelerated avenue to the MSW degree. Table 2 depicts the course equivalencies among BSW courses and first-level MSW courses.
Table 3  Senior-year schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall Courses</th>
<th>Spring Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MSW-level HBSE(^a) I (SOWK 500)</td>
<td>MSW-level HBSE II (SOWK 501)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW-level Practice I (SOWK 503)</td>
<td>MSW-level Practice II (SOWK 504)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MSW-level Small Groups (unless BSW-level group</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>elective taken)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW-level Fieldwork I</td>
<td>BSW-level Integrative Practice Seminar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MSW-level Fieldwork II</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)HBSE = human behavior and the social environment.

Table 3 shows the MSW course schedule of 5-year students during their senior year.

The coursework taken during the senior year allows the 5-year student to complete all of the requirements for the BSW degree. After conferral of the BSW degree, the student begins the MSW program as a 2nd-year or concentration-year student.

Findings

Comparison of 5-year and 1st-year MSW students  One concern among faculty was whether undergraduate students could master the material in graduate-level courses during their senior year. Not only are undergraduate students less advanced in their academic training, but also they may have less life experience. There was concern that these deficits might hamper the performance of BSW students in foundation-level courses, especially practice classes.

To examine this issue, aggregate data were obtained for all students who took the foundation-level practice courses (SOWK 503 and 504) and the foundation-level human behavior and the social environment courses (SOWK 500 and 501) during the fall and spring semesters of AY 2004 through AY 2008.* Because 1st-year MSW students and seniors in the 5-year program take these required courses together, it was reasoned that a comparison of the average GPAs for the two groups would indicate whether 5-year students were performing comparably to 1st-year graduate students. Because the data were provided in aggregate, statistical tests could not be performed to determine whether the means differed significantly. Further, the divergent group sizes

\(^*\)SOWK 500 and SOWK 503 were generally offered in the fall semester, and SOWK 501 and SOWK 504 in the spring. A small number of MSW students took these courses in the off semester (for example, they enrolled in 500 in the spring and 504 in the fall). All students who took one of these courses in the fall or spring were included in the calculation of the average GPA for both the 5-year and MSW student groups. Five-year students who attended these courses in the fall or spring were included even if they later left the program. At the same time, averages for students who took one or more of these courses in the summer were not included because there were only three 5-year students enrolled in one of these courses in the summer term across all 5 years.
may have rendered such tests problematic. However, the data did provide an opportunity to examine the trends and to see whether differences existed between the two groups. These data are provided in Table 4.

The results indicate that for most years, the 5-year students did as well, on average, and, for some courses, even slightly better than those in the MSW program. Most differences between the groups were not very large. It appears that the one class in which the 5-year students tended to perform less well was the second social work practice class (SOWK 504). In AY 2005, the difference between the MSW students and 5-year students for this course was particularly notable (3.667 for the MSW students versus 3.297 for the 5-year students). Smaller differences exist in AY 2006 and AY 2008 related to the average grade for this course, but those in the 5-year program did slightly less well in SOWK 504 than those in the MSW program. At the same time, in AY 2004 they did slightly better (3.876 for the 5-year students versus 3.781 for the MSW students), and in AY 2007, the groups were comparable related to their average grade in SOWK 504.

It also appears that with the exception of AY 2006, which also included the largest group of 5-year students and, as noted, may have been subject to less
rigorous admission standards, the average GPA for students in the 5-year program is quite similar to the GPA of MSW students for all courses, even though they did slightly less well in SOWK 504 in some years. In AY 2006 the 5-year students had slightly lower averages for all four courses compared to those in the MSW program. Yet the group still did quite well, with a GPA close to A- for all four courses. Also of note is that in AY 2005, AY 2007, and AY 2008, the 5-year students did slightly better, on average, than the MSW students in SOWK 500 (the first of the two human behavior courses), and differences between the two groups related to this course are quite small in AY 2004 and AY 2006.

Initial Program Evaluation

In addition to examining data to see how the 5-year students performed academically, two exploratory surveys were distributed, one to 5-year students and a second to social work faculty during the 2005 academic year. The purpose of these surveys was to better understand each constituency’s perspectives regarding satisfaction with the program and to identify and ultimately address any concerns that emerged. The surveys were considered a routine academic/educational program evaluation and were exempt from review by the university’s institutional review board.

Student evaluation component  The student evaluation was distributed by e-mail to all 5-year program students and graduates. The survey was constructed to capture information about student satisfaction with the program in a variety of areas. Some questions covered issues such as the financial advantages of the program. The expectation was that students would have a positive view of this program aspect, and the survey was intended to confirm this assumption. Student views about issues such as program administrator performance, overall satisfaction with advising, or program structure (i.e., schedule of classes and sequence of courses) were less evident, and the survey served as a means to elicit student input. Using a Likert scale (1=very unsatisfied, 5=very satisfied), respondents were asked to rate their overall level of satisfaction with the following components: overall program, academic quality, financial aspects of the program, advising, program structure, and program administrators. An additional 10 open-ended questions were asked to gather respondents’ reasons for selecting the program, their desired accomplishments via the program, their perceived program strengths and weaknesses, their view of the integration between the BSW and MSW components of the program, and their likelihood of enrolling in the program if they could do it all over again or of recommending it to friends.

Student evaluation results  The response rate for the student survey was relatively low (12 of 22 surveyed returned the evaluation or 54.5%), and those who returned it were currently enrolled in the program. This suggests that the student survey may have some bias. However, the results are presented to provide some feedback on the program from the student’s point of view.
(a) Student satisfaction. Using a cut-off score of 3.0 on the Likert scale as indicating a level of satisfaction (scores below 3.0 indicate general lack of satisfaction; scores above 3.0 indicate general satisfaction), the student respondents were relatively satisfied with most aspects of the program measured by the survey. The overall mean score for satisfaction across all measured indicators was 3.32 (SD=.77). The specific indicators were scored as follows: overall program satisfaction=3.83 (SD=.83), academic quality=4.08 (SD=1.16), financial aspects of the program=2.25 (SD=1.29), advising=2.67 (SD=1.30), program structure=3.92 (SD=.90), and administration in charge of the program=3.17 (SD=1.27).

(b) Student attitudes and feedback. The open-ended items were reviewed for thematic content, and clusters of responses were identified that captured some of the individual variability among respondents. Table 5 summarizes the major themes that emerged from the open-ended questions.

Of the 12 student respondents, 9 (75%) said if they had to do it all over again they would choose a BSW–MSW 5-year program. In addition, 10 (83.3%) said they would recommend a 5-year program to a friend.

Faculty evaluation component The faculty evaluation was distributed to all current full-time faculty members. Twenty surveys were distributed, and 14 were returned for a response rate of 70%. The survey was confidential and anonymous. Using a Likert scale (1=none, 5=extensive), the survey collected faculty data on the following variables: the overall support for the 5-year program when initially approved by the school, the faculty members’ knowledge of 5-year program students in their MSW-level courses, the need to change teaching methods because of the presence of 5-year students in MSW-level courses, and the overall support for the program at the time of the survey.

Program support when initially approved by the school The overall mean level of support for the program when it was initially approved by the school was 4.21 (SD=.80).

Knowledge of program students in MSW-level courses Of the 14 returned surveys from faculty, 12 (85.7%) indicated they had 5-year program students in their courses. One respondent indicated that a 5-year program student had never taken his or her courses, and one respondent did not know whether a 5-year program student was taking his or her courses.

Need to change teaching methods because of program students in MSW-level courses The 12 respondents who indicated that 5-year program students were present in their courses noted whether changes to teaching methods were subsequently required. Using a Likert scale (1=extensive change required, 5=no change required), the overall mean was 4.40 (SD=.90). The subcategories related to changing teaching methods included the following variables: change classroom environment, change lectures, change class discussions, change course objectives, change course assignments, and change grading process. Across all six subcategories, the mode for each variable was 5, indicating that no change
was necessary because of the presence of a 5-year program student in the respondent’s MSW course.

Current support for program The overall mean level of support for the program at the time of the program evaluation was 4.43 (SD=.85).

Limitations and Discussion

This article describes an innovative approach to the continuum of baccalaureate–master’s level social work education and provides some preliminary data related to its effectiveness. Prior to discussing the evaluation of the program and its implications for new models such as the one discussed here, it is important to point out the limitations of the data.
As noted, there are far fewer students in the 5-year BSW–MSW program group than in the traditional MSW program. This makes a statistical comparison of the mean grade point averages for the two groups problematic, although such a comparison would be more precise for assessing differences and similarities. In addition, grades are an imperfect indicator of program success. As discussed, the limitations of the survey of the 5-year students included a low response rate. Clearly, a more rigorous evaluation that compared several outcomes is warranted to fully understand the impact of the program as well as its strengths and weaknesses. Such an evaluation might look at indicators such as proficiency in the field, attainment of core competencies as defined by CSWE, final GPA, and even performance on licensure exams to more fully assess whether students in the 5-year program are as prepared as those in a traditional 2-year MSW program. Similarly, surveys of students in both programs related to primary areas such as academics, field, program structure, and student support would allow for a better assessment of whether students in either program feel equally prepared and satisfied.

Additional and more systematic knowledge about the 5-year BSW–MSW program seems especially warranted, because initial results suggest that students in the program do as well as traditional students and are positive about their experience despite these limitations. Both the objective and open-ended responses of the initial program evaluation indicated that the students were generally satisfied with most aspects of the program. They commented positively regarding its accelerated nature and the prospect of beginning their career development earlier in a comfortable, familiar academic setting. They also cited the opportunity to receive their MSW degree within 1 year of their BSW degree at the same institution as a valued aspect of the program.

The evaluations also highlighted opportunities for improvement, as evidenced by less satisfaction with financial matters, registration, the advising process, and integration of the 5-year students. The BSW program director worked with the university to establish better handling of the 5-year program students’ financial and registration matters. Difficulties arose when 5-year students who were still pursuing their BSW degree were coded as graduate students in the university system due to their concurrent enrollment in MSW courses. It became clear that problems in the university’s coding system were responsible for double billing and registration difficulties. The coding system was modified to resolve these issues.

To address the concern about accurate and consistent advising, a single academic adviser was assigned to all students admitted into the 5-year program. A template to facilitate students’ planning of their academic schedules was developed and disseminated. The merger of the BSW student association with the MSW student association helped address the concern about integrating the 5-year students into the MSW program. Establishing one association allowed for greater interaction and communication between both constituencies. Also, with the general trend toward increases in the
number of 5-year students, this cohort has gained more visibility and attention within the school.

The initial program evaluation also addressed some of the faculty concerns that were raised when the 5-year program was first proposed—namely, that the MSW coursework would need changes to accommodate these students, or that the students would be unable to handle the MSW coursework. These concerns were not supported by the findings from the evaluation. Similarly, our analysis of grades for the four courses that the two groups of students take together (SOWK 500, 501, 503, and 504) confirmed that the 5-year students did as well as 1st-year MSW students, at least in these foundation-level courses. The faculty evaluation also indicated that there was strong faculty support for the program at the time of its inception, and that level of support grew modestly by the time of the evaluation. Most important, faculty members who indicated the presence of 5-year program students in their MSW courses generally reported no changes to their courses for the 5-year students.

CSWE recently granted reaffirmation to the school, the first reaccreditation for the school with the BSW–MSW 5-year program in place. The site team and subsequent feedback from CSWE found no problems with the 5-year program’s structure or functioning within the larger school of social work.

The introduction of the 5-year program at this institution has resulted in a number of positive outcomes for the BSW program and its students. There is now significantly greater respect by the faculty for the knowledge and skills of its BSW students and for BSW graduates in general. The BSW program is viewed as a more valuable component of the school’s academic offerings, and its students have a more central role in the life of the school. In addition, the 5-year program has been especially attractive to students who were already committed to the orientation and philosophy of this particular institution. It has provided a clear pathway for them to remain a part of this community. The 5-year program also enabled students and their families to do long-range financial planning for both undergraduate and graduate education. Although students who study at both undergraduate and graduate levels in one institution may be exposed to fewer faculty, there is also greater opportunity for long-term faculty mentoring than would be the case in more traditional degree options.

**Conclusion**

It seems logical that the 5-year program be regarded as a valuable option for schools of social work. The 5-year BSW–MSW could offer a new pathway for responding to the current economic constraints faced by higher education institutions and the ever-present demand for increased student enrollments. Such a program would address student and parental pressure for expedient degree and career routes. The initial results of the evaluation suggest that the 5-year BSW–MSW model successfully educates and prepares social work students com-
parably to traditional programs. Further research that more systematically highlights the strengths and weaknesses of this approach would help to more fully understand its benefits as well as the areas where the model could be enhanced. The 5-year model’s “seamless” option would allow for earlier and more enhanced mentoring, and professional integration of students. Developing a 5-year program could further help graduate programs attract the best and the brightest students, particularly those already committed to their institution and profession. With pedagogical and administrative integrity, such programs could provide an essential link in the continuum of BSW and MSW education.

References


