



Social Work Competencies Regarding Diversity and Social Justice

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the national association of social work education programs and is responsible for establishing the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) for the 800-plus accredited programs in the U.S. and its territories. Accreditation demonstrates that a program meets the national standards for social work education, and graduation from an accredited program is often required for practitioners to seek a license to practice social work.

There are efforts in some states to introduce legislation that seeks to constrain how universities teach about diversity. In fact, some proposed legislation would impose funding cuts on public colleges if any class or activity promotes “division between, resentment of, or social justice” for race, gender, political affiliations, social class, or a “particular class of people.” Legislators seeking to alter social work education should consider the implications on accredited programs.

Requiring programs to achieve and maintain competency in the areas of diversity, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality has been central to social work accreditation standards since 1952. A fundamental aspect of this foundational knowledge is to teach about historical institutionalization of privilege and oppression that has permeated our systems and social fabric.

In the current iteration of the CSWE EPAS, accredited social work programs are required to teach about racism and social justice based on two (of nine) social work competencies. Each competency is carefully and intentionally worded to ensure that programs have clear guidance on developing activities, lessons, and courses that align with social work values accreditation needs.

Competency 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice

Social workers understand how diversity and difference characterize and shape the human experience and are critical to the formation of identity. The dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including but not limited to age, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, marital status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status. Social workers understand that, as a consequence of difference, a person’s life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization, and alienation as well as privilege, power, and acclaim. Social workers also understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and recognize the extent to which a culture’s structures and values, including social, economic, political, and cultural exclusions, may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create privilege and power.

Competency 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice

Social workers understand that every person regardless of position in society has fundamental human rights such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Social workers understand the global interconnections of oppression and human rights violations and are knowledgeable about theories of human need and social justice and strategies to promote social and economic justice and human rights. Social workers understand strategies designed to eliminate oppressive structural barriers to ensure that social goods, rights, and responsibilities are distributed equitably, and that civil, political, environmental, economic, social, and cultural human rights are protected.

If there are any questions concerning social work education, please contact president@cswe.org.