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Schools of social work and the nature of their foreign collaborations

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In the last two decades schools of social work have increasingly attempted to internationalize their curricula (Asamoah et al., 1997). This has been met through faculty exchange and visitation (Tunney, 2002), student travel both to and from foreign countries (Boyle et al., 1999) and the infusion of a global perspective into course content (Mary, 1997). What is not well known is the nature and extent of the overseas collaborations between US and foreign schools/programs. This article will first report on the findings of a 2002 survey of deans and directors of US accredited Masters of Social Work (MSW) programs which asked them whether they had overseas collaborations and if those collaborations had been affected by the attacks in the US on 11 September 2001 (9/11). We will then describe two collaborations that the University of Maryland School of Social Work has with a social work program in India and in Ghana. One of these collaborations is well-established and the other program is in a nascent stage.

The relevance of foreign collaborations

What is the purpose of a foreign collaboration? The answer is linked both to the philosophical and existential benefits of the acquisition

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of social work knowledge and practice in general and to enlightened self-interest specifically. To the first benefit, increased knowledge serves the personal and greater good. But the benefit goes beyond this if we agree that, on many levels, we all face similar problems. For example, while abject poverty and economic oppression exist in third-world countries, they also exist (though to a lesser degree) in the US. Caragata and Sanchez (2002), discussing the history of international social work, point out the ethnocentrism of the belief that one has to go abroad to learn about poverty. Now we realize it is not only poverty and economic oppression that we share in common with other countries. Threats to the environment, unfair trade policies, security, employment imbalances, refugee displacement, health issues and unstable financial markets also affect everyone. Caragata and Sanchez write, 'We suggest that an international social work perspective can contribute to the shared understandings necessary to respond effectively to social problems, including alleviating poverty and combating racism, cultural imperialism and violence' (2002: 223).

Where many of the early efforts at international social work by Americans were to learn about and help others in situ, a seeming altruistic exchange which Tunney (2002) refers to as professional imperialism, there now exists a more immediate self-interest to such international exchanges. Nagy and Falk (2000) argue that social workers need to understand international concerns to work better with diversity-related issues and that understanding other countries' approaches to problems may garner solutions to our own. In addition, they suggest that collaborations can help to ensure the survival of the profession if we are able to widen the scope of our practice across borders.

Collaborations are not specifically defined in the literature but tend to encompass relationships between schools, agreements as student and practitioner/faculty study visits abroad, faculty exchanges, research collaborations and material exchanges. For example, Boyle et al. (1999) described a visiting relationship between the University of Georgia and the University of Veracruz. This collaboration included a cultural immersion in Mexico, co-authorships involving faculty from each institution, consultative visits around program evaluation and the co-development of an instrument to measure cultural competence.

Others have described communication with other programs but do not specifically detail collaborations. Johnson (1999) describes

an innovative internet arrangement with students in Romania. Rai (2002) alludes to the recruitment of international students coming, in part, from contacts that faculty at the American schools had with foreign schools. Healy (1988) surveyed experts in the field of international social work and found consensus on the needs of graduate students, which included being an informed citizen, and having international practice skills and cross-cultural competence.

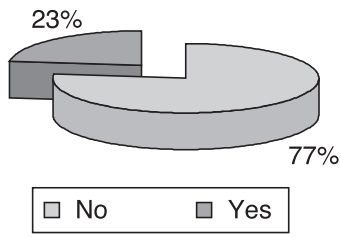
Groundwork can also be laid for future collaborations by universities through curriculum development. Separate courses on international themes are offered by schools of social work in the US, but are more often the exception than the rule (Nagy and Falk, 2000). Social work faculty doing consultancy is also common, according to Bogo and Herington (1988).

Bachelor's programs have been the subject of inquiry about international arrangements, too. Johnson (1996) surveyed BSW programs' international interests and activities. Twelve percent of the responding programs had a travel seminar or international exchange, many of which were administered out of another department in the college. Twenty-five percent reported their faculty participated in some kind of faculty exchange program.

Whatever collaboration is undertaken, Tunney's (2002) experiences with visiting Lithuania point out the need for faculty to understand the difference between countries that have a collectivist mentality and those, like the US, that have an individualist mentality. Without an understanding of the culture and its history, collaborations will fail.

Methodology and descriptive findings

In January 2002 we mailed a short questionnaire with an envelope for return mailing to every dean and director of an accredited MSW program in the US. Questions asked whether the school or department had a collaborative arrangement with any school of social work or department outside the US and whether this arrangement had been affected by 9/11. Respondents were asked about faculty visits both to and from the US, student exchanges, jointly run research projects based in either country, and exchange of computers, books and other materials. For each area, respondents who answered in the affirmative were asked whether these collaborations had changed after 9/11.



Source: University of Maryland School of Social Work, 2002.

Figure 1 Percent of US programs with an academic collaboration with another program outside the US, 2002 ($n = 85$)

This approach, aided by a follow-up mailing, yielded a 60 percent return rate ($N = 85$). Twenty-three percent of the schools that responded had at least one foreign collaboration (Figure 1). Forty-two percent of this subgroup ($n = 26$) had collaborations with two or more schools. The most common collaboration was one where faculty and students went to each other's schools. Nearly three-quarters of the collaborations represented activities where either faculty or students from the US went to the school outside the US. In about 60 percent of the collaborations (57.6%), joint research was being carried out, usually in the foreign country. Shipping computers, books and educational materials from the American school to the foreign school was less common (26.9%) and non-existent between the foreign school and the US (Table 1). Although not reported in the table, only a handful of schools reported that their plans of students visiting overseas had been affected by 9/11. A few schools indicated that their university had numerous collaborations while the school or department itself had none, similar to findings of the BSW research (Johnson, 1996).

Overseas collaborations existed between both small schools of social work (under 75 students in the MSW program) and large schools (over 800 students). Twenty-four different countries were cited as the overseas partner. Collaborators were in Asia, Africa, eastern Europe, western Europe, South and Central America (including Mexico) and Australia. South Africa had the most collaborators from the US ($n = 4$), followed by Mexico, Germany and Ghana with three.

Table 1 Characteristics of collaborations with programs outside the US, 2002 ($n = 26$)

Characteristic	Yes %	No %
Their faculty come to the US	65.3	34.7
US faculty go overseas	76.9	23.1
Their students come to the US	53.8	46.2
US students go overseas	73.1	26.9
We are jointly involved in research based in their country	57.6	42.4
We are jointly involved in research based in the US	23.1	76.9
We send them computers, books and educational materials	26.9	73.1
They send us computers, books and educational materials	0.0	100.0

University of Maryland collaborations: a tale of two continents

The University of Maryland School of Social Work started its first official collaboration, accompanied by a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between two institutions, in 1999. Its second collaboration began in 2001 and also involved a signed MOU.

Rajagiri School of Social Science, Cochin, India

Our relationship with this university is highly developed, involves an official 'twinning' agreement, a signed MOU, visits of their faculty to our school, trips by our students and faculty to their school, a faculty consultation with this school, transfers of their students to us, our shipping books to them and an official visit from our administration to their university. The only undeveloped area is in joint research.

The collaboration originated under the aegis of one of our faculty, Raju Varghese, who had a teaching and personal connection with Rajagiri which is in his home province, Kerala. In 1998, he led a group of students on a three-week trip to India which included a visit to Rajagiri. Students attended classes, heard special lectures and visited field agencies. Students earned two credits as part of an International Social Work course which included completing a

paper assignment. Both before and after the student trip, faculty members and administrators from Rajagiri visited the University of Maryland. In 2000, Dr Varghese led a second group of students. A trip planned for January 2002 was cancelled because of events related to 9/11.

Following these first visits, both schools agreed to start a twinning program. In India, the agreement was signed at a ceremony attended by high-ranking administrators from Rajagiri and covered in the local newspaper, a sign of the importance of the arrangement with a university in the US. The nature of a twinning program is that we collaborate with the school in admitting their students into our program. The agreement specifically states, 'The two institutions will collaborate for academic exchange of faculty and students on mutually agreed upon programs of Social Work education and research, and for any other activity for the purpose of educational advancement and knowledge building in Social Work.' This agreement does not promise any specific student, faculty, research, equipment or financial exchange.

The practical outcome of the agreement has been that two students have come to Maryland. They are handled as transfer students who need to complete our 30-credit advanced year as well as the foundation policy course. The requirement for the policy course comes out of the belief that the Rajagiri curriculum does not expose them to the history and functioning of the welfare system in the US, knowledge that is necessary for success in both advanced field and an advanced policy course. Dr Varghese worked closely with them to assist with housing in Maryland and with the visa application process.

Another planned student trip by the University of Maryland to India in January 2003 did not get sufficient registration due, we believe, to continued concerns about the safety of overseas travel (raised by the bombing in Bali and the continued conflicts between Pakistan and India) as well as the economic downturn which made the cost of the trip prohibitive. It was hoped that new faculty involvement would make the program continuing more likely. In January 2005 ten students from the University of Maryland enrolled in the International Social Work class and traveled to India.

Having such a relationship with a foreign school has served the University of Maryland well. It has exposed students and faculty to new ideas taught by their visiting faculty and has attracted some interest from potential applicants to the school seeking an international field placement and educational orientation. While

no one has traveled to Rajagiri for a field placement yet, this still remains a possibility.

Faculty of Social Studies, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana
Compared with Rajagari, the activities with the Social Work Program (Social Administration) at the University of Ghana, Legon are in their embryonic stage. Faculty have visited their university twice, but we have not gone as far as exchanging students or sharing teaching responsibilities. Our collaboration with them began as a result of a visit to them by one of our faculty members, Joshua Okundaye, during 2000. Following a meeting with the chair of their Social Work program, we arranged to bring a delegation to the University of Ghana in 2001 to discuss mutual interests around developing a partnership between the two universities. This resulted in the development of a letter of intent that indicated an agreement to work together on teaching and research interests and to share resources whenever possible. This visit also included consultation concerning curriculum development at the University of Ghana and the donation of several surplus computers from the University of Maryland. In our meetings with members of their academic divisions, a consensus was reached on the importance of US instructors respecting and supporting the indigenous paradigms used by the faculty at the University of Ghana as we move forward with planning future exchanges.

Since our first two visits, the majority of our collaboration has focused on completing administrative paperwork that will result in collaborations between the campuses. In particular, we focused on first obtaining the necessary MOUs from both campuses as well as processing applications for three of our faculty members to serve as visiting professors. In addition, we have moved forward with lectures, including in our Comparative Social Policy class, which reflect social welfare issues and concerns in Ghana. This commitment to collaborating also resulted in a funded grant for international collaboration and plans to develop other collaborations. In September 2002 one of our faculty members became a visiting professor at the University of Ghana.

Even though quite a bit has been accomplished during a short period of time, the collaboration is still embryonic in that several factors have slowed down the momentum of these activities. In addition to the usual obstacles posed by geographic distances (phone, mail, fax and email), recent international political events have delayed plans to visit the university. We had originally planned to

visit in January 2002. However, the 9/11 attacks forced us to postpone the trip. While we have moved forward with our collaborations since then, it is with a different attitude – that of cautiously thinking about international events as we plan.

Discussion and conclusions

Results of the survey of deans and directors suggest that most social work programs in the US currently do not have collaborative relationships with a program outside the US. Of those that do, the primary emphasis is on the exchange of faculty and students, and, secondarily, on research based in their country. The events related to 9/11 appear to have had a minimal impact on these relationships. While this survey did not examine the nature of these collaborations, there is some evidence to suggest that the lack of international collaborations is a significant problem in higher education. In the 1950s and 1960s there was considerable interest in transferring the then dominant US paradigms of individual dysfunction and treatment to social work schools outside the US. This information was typically seen by other countries as irrelevant or even harmful (Asamoah et al., 1997). More recently, a 14-country Carnegie Foundation study of the academic profession found that 'American faculty, alone among the 14 countries, were largely uncommitted to internationalism' (Altbach and Peterson, 1998: 39). Asamoah et al. (1997: 390) also report that more than 90 percent of the US professors across disciplines 'do not believe they need to read books or journals published in other countries to keep up with their field'. These findings suggest that Americans may need to do more international collaboration to make social work education relevant in the global context. They also suggest that attention to the cultural paradigm of another country is central to ensuring its citizens will benefit. A further important consideration is the diversity within a country. Just as social work practices with different ethnic populations in the US vary, so must they in countries like India whose residents' own histories and cultures vary greatly.

The two examples of collaborative efforts from our university have taught us a few things that may be useful to schools that are considering international partnerships. First, we learned that we needed to be sensitive to how international events can influence the planning and the implementation of these collaborations. For example, we had to make adjustments to our plans immediately after 9/11 and following recent conflicts between India and Pakistan.

These adjustments not only included modifications to some logistical arrangements (e.g. changing the dates of planned trips), they also included the need to engage in continuing discussions about how these events influence the direction of our collaborations. These discussions have helped us to see that our success in working together may be intertwined with how we both view the dynamics of larger international events. This is very humbling in that it drives home the notion that part of how we are seen by our collaborators may be related to how they view Americans, in general, based on events reported in the international media. The same can also be said for how we view our international colleagues. This highlights the importance of constant communication as an integral part of the collaboration effort.

Second, we learned from these activities the importance of individual efforts in fostering international collaboration. What we have found is that the strength, continuity and stability of an international collaboration are dependent on the time and resources committed on the individual level on both sides of the effort. If there is only one colleague at each campus committed to the collaboration, it is difficult to maintain that collaboration over time. Thus, to solidify our efforts we had to involve many colleagues at both institutions to increase the chance that the collaboration would continue if the efforts of the initial individual ceased.

Third, we learned that the challenges of assembling and transferring material overseas proved to be a significant obstacle. For example, we needed clearance from both the University of Maryland and the US Department of State to ship computers overseas. It is no surprise that only a few schools in our survey have exchanged books, computers and educational materials.

These activities are an example of what Ife (1995) calls 'globalization from below'. According to him, 'the main aim of globalization from below is to establish a clear global agenda, with global structures, but with initiative taken by ordinary people' (Ife, 1995, as cited in Johnson, 1999). Globalization from below relies on the use of democratic grassroots activities to create a more participatory model of international change. Thus Ife suggests that using techniques like globalization from below are important in the further development of international social work.

Despite financial costs and administrative time spent, we believe these relationships are beneficial to the schools involved. They are exciting to faculty from the collaborating institutions who get to travel to the other universities, open possibilities for research and

aid in bringing back a better sense of social work in other countries. To a large extent, as Caragata and Sanchez (2002) write, these cross-cultural exchanges are imperative to meet the increasing global need for gaining knowledge of another culture to help solve each country's problems. In addition, these collaborations provide a foundation for an exchange of Fulbright scholars. Students, who according to Nagy and Falk (2000) tend to focus more on immediate needs and less on international concerns, learn a great deal from their travel and from being exposed to students from foreign countries. For example, by understanding the effect of the development practices of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on the economies of developing countries, it becomes easier to understand why some countries are advocating for debt relief as a social policy solution. Then by understanding that there is a critical need for community development in urban and rural areas in developing countries, it becomes easier to understand why a social work program would need to train more macro-practice than micro-practice social workers. In addition, there is something to be said in times of economic turmoil for learning how to do more with less, which is one of the lessons we learn from developing partnerships.

Finally, such collaborations also attract potential applicants to a school of social work. Applicants mention our international focus and travel program as one reason they consider the University of Maryland. In tough financial times, this is one more reason to consider these arrangements. Ultimately, it must be remembered that social workers throughout the world are part of one profession that does have common tenets regardless of where practice occurs. These include respect for the individual and a commitment to work against oppression. It is in the carrying out of these tenets that practice may vary.

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