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Tarin Mink

*Samaritan Behavioral Health, Inc.*

Sarah Twill

*Wright State University*

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# Using Service-Learning to Teach a Social Work Policy Course

Tarin Mink and Sarah Twill

## Abstract

Preparing students to be passionate about and engage in policy work can be a challenge for social work educators. Previous research supports that service-learning can increase positive attitudes and participation in macro practice. This manuscript presents a policy course that was taught using service-learning projects. Feedback from students was collected during the course and 15 months after its conclusion. Feedback from students suggested that students increased their confidence and competencies as policy practitioners and that the service-learning projects were influential in that change. After the course, students were engaging in policy activities such as calling, emailing, or writing an elected official, working on a specific policy change effort, participating as a member of a coalition working on a political issue of change, and voting. Lessons learned from this service-learning project are applicable to allied disciplines; implications for wider curriculum adoption and future research are discussed.

## Introduction

It can be challenging for social work educators to communicate the importance of social welfare policy course objectives and themes to students. The usefulness of a macro skill set may not be appreciated by many undergraduate students until beginning a professional social work career. Dooley, Sellers, and Gordon-Hempe (2009) postulated that this attitude may stem from “a lack of knowledge regarding what macro practice involves and how it is implemented, rather than from a dislike of this area of practice” (p. 435). However, previous research supports that service-learning can increase positive attitudes and participation in policy practice (Anderson, 2006; Anderson & Harris, 2005; Droppa, 2007; Rocha, 2000). This manuscript explores a policy course that utilized a service-learning project. Fifteen months following the course, the attitudes and behaviors about policy practice were explored.

## Literature Review

Jane Addams and Ellen Starr understood that a presence within the community would lead to a change in social welfare issues and create a commitment to community outreach (Kenny & Gallagher, 2002). The early values and philosophies of the Hull House are present in the practice today. Norris and Schwartz (2009) explain that the blending of “experiential learning, civic responsibility, and evidenced-based practice is the very foundation of social work practice and education” (p. 376). Given the mission of social work to participate in societal change, social work educators should be concerned about preparing future practitioners to be civically engaged

members of the profession and society.

King (2003) reviewed social work’s history with service-learning and the positive benefits it offers to students, educators, and the communities served. He reported that the majority of literature in social work about the technique has focused on micro courses and skills. Social work students possess more negative attitudes toward macro courses than toward micro topics (Dooley, Sellers, & Gordon-Hempe, 2009; Hymans, 2000), and alumni report being insufficiently prepared for policy practice (Anderson & Harris, 2005). Researchers found that using service-learning in policy courses created valuable learning experiences and more positive attitudes toward policy (Anderson, 2006; Anderson & Harris, 2005; Droppa, 2007; Rocha, 2000).

Service-learning can benefit the education of students in several ways. Values such as diversity, self-determination, accountability, and collaboration can be taught using service-learning methods, which further students’ learning and social work knowledge (King, 2003; Williams & Reeves, 2004). Service-learning also promotes professional development. For example, Williams, King, and Kobb (2002) established that participation in the practice increased students’ ratings of their professional self-efficacy. Kropf and Tracey (2002) found that service-learning provided both pre-field preparation for MSW students and allowed social work educators an additional way to monitor professional readiness.

Anderson (2006) used a community-based research project in her policy course to increase interest in macro practice. Students worked with a health clinic that served undocumented Latinas who experienced domestic violence. Using the

Violence Against Women Act, students conducted research and made policy and procedure recommendations to the agency. Anderson argued that traditional macro courses taught policy from the positivist paradigm, thus distancing students from the social welfare policies studied. Using service-learning allowed her to teach from a postmodern perspective. Students "mucked through the swamp" by working with a local agency to assess how legislation impacted clientele. Anderson found this approach to analyzing policy decreased students' anxieties and increased their enthusiasm for policy work.

Droppa (2007) used a service-learning project in his policy courses for BSW students. Students reported that being involved in the community helped them understand the policy issues discussed in class. He found that BSW students who participated in the service-learning projects reported a desire to be involved in policy practice and felt the projects better prepared them for graduate school or employment.

Finally, Rocha (2000) conducted a study with MSW students who had taken a policy course as part of their graduate program. Half of the participants took a policy course that had a service-learning component, while the other half of the participants were taught using traditional methods. Rocha found that participants who had the service-learning component rated their competency as policy practitioners higher than those who did not have the experiential component. Also, the students who had taken the service-learning course reported engaging in more policy activities (e.g., communicating with elected officials, participating in community meetings on public policy issues, voting, or joining a citizen action group) following graduation.

Engagement in the community, including political work and advocacy, is not unique to social work, but is situated in the larger civic engagement literature. Boyte (2004) in his book *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* called for institutions of higher education to help students move from the micro work of solving individual problems to the mezzo and macro work of partnering with communities for change. This view is not unlike the work of Courtney and Specht (1994) who proposed that social workers had abandoned their social change agenda for practice with individuals. Boyte (2004) further argued that individuals have become consumers of government rather than co-creators of democracy. In order to remedy this, individuals must redefine

how they participate in their communities by taking a more active role in politics and civic life.

This project presents a BSW social work policy course that attempted to move students into their roles as public citizens. Service-learning projects were designed to help students develop the professional skills needed to engage in mezzo and macro level change. In addition to learning the academic content, it was hoped that students would change their attitudes and behaviors about macro practice. Journal responses at the end of the course focus group, and a follow-up interview with students 15 months after the course concluded, helped to answer the following questions: After completing the service-learning policy course, do the students report more positive regard for their roles as macro practitioners? Do they engage in policy behaviors such as communicating with elected officials, participating in community meetings on public policy issues, voting, or joining a citizen action group?

## **Characteristics of the Course**

### *Description of the Course*

The course was a senior level policy course required for graduation at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. The course was designed to meet the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) curriculum related to social welfare policy and services. The course took place in a five-week summer quarter. Sixteen students enrolled in the course. Class was scheduled for two 210-minute sessions per week. Content was presented to students in a traditional academic manner (e.g., lecture, discussion, in class activities) during one class session per week. For the second day of class each week, students were required to spend a minimum of 210 minutes engaged in service-learning work related to a policy project designed by the instructor and the community partner to reinforce the concepts of the course.

### *Course Projects and Assignments*

In order to apply the concepts from the course, students selected from one of four service-learning projects. The projects were prearranged by the instructor and coordinated through the University's Office of Service Learning. Attention was given to selecting projects that aligned with social work values and dealt with issues that impacted different populations. On the first day of the course, students had an opportunity to select the project for which they wished to work. Students

negotiated with each other and with the instructor to reach consensus about group assignments. This allowed students to select a project in which they were interested, aligned with their personal and professional values, and fit their schedules. A minimum of three students were needed for each project and no more than five students could work on a project. Additionally, final projects or deliverables were negotiated between the instructor and the community partner. Because this course took place in a five-week summer term, there was less opportunity for students to be involved in the preplanning of the projects. Students did negotiate some content of the final project with the partner and instructor. In a traditional academic term, students could be given more responsibility of identifying partners and projects.

The first group worked with a state representative and his staff on a bill regarding prisoner re-entry programs. The representative wanted the students involved to interview social workers who were employed in the field of criminal justice about their attitudes toward the bill and prepare an executive summary. This group took the project a step further by sending a letter in support of the bill to the office of the state National Association of Social Workers in Raleigh, N.C. The group negotiated with the instructor that this additional task be part of their final project. The second project involved working with a state senator on a bill proposing a cap on textbook prices. Students were asked to interview key informants, specifically faculty members who had written a textbook, librarians, and bookstores, about their attitudes regarding the bill. The senator needed an executive summary of the findings and this was the final project for the group.

The third project was helping a national advocacy organization contact community members about the 2007 farm bill, specifically issues related to food stamps. The organization wanted students to contact member groups to discuss the merits of the bill and to encourage them to become politically active. Unlike the other projects in which the community partner requested a final report from the students, this organization did not need a report. As a result, students spent all of their service-learning hours advocating for the passage of the farm bill with the agency's constituents.

The fourth project involved working with a local agency who served senior adults. The agency wanted to promote a bill that would streamline service for seniors. The final project for the group

was creating a letter of support from the agency to all members of the state House and Senate requesting support of the bill. As the project progressed, the students identified that advocacy materials that could be used with clients were needed. The students worked with the community partner to design advocacy materials for the agency to use with clients and their families. They negotiated the addition of this task as part of their final project and grade.

In order to help students reflect on their experiences, the students were required to complete log assignments. Students completed three logs over the course of the term that integrated their work with the community partner and the course content. The log assignment required students to respond to three or four questions about their policy knowledge. Details about the log questions are presented in the methods section under student reflections.

In the final week, students completed a final project, and turned in a paper detailing their reflection of the experiences. Finally, all four groups participated in a reception and presented their findings to the class and the community partners.

## **Methodology**

### *Data Collection*

This study employed a mixed method design. Data from two time periods were collected and analyzed. At the end of the term (time period one), data were collected from students using the following methods: reflection journals that were part of the course assignments and an end of the course focus group. In order to protect participants, the protocol of the study was approved by the authors' university IRB. Sixteen students participated in the research; a full description of the participant demographics can be found in the results section.

### *Data Analysis*

Qualitative data were collected from multiple sources (interviews, student reflection logs, and focus group notes) in time period one and two. In order to best understand the qualitative data, the first author transcribed her notes from the interviews. The second author transcribed notes from the focus group. The student reflection logs were already typed; the second author compiled responses to the questions. All qualitative data were reviewed and independently open coded

by both authors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The purpose of the open coding was to discover how the students described their experiences and to look for meaning in the data. In the first round of analysis, photocopies of the transcripts were cut into relevant strips of data and sorted into constructs. Next, similar constructs were grouped and labeled as concepts. Data and key student quotes were placed on notecards and then sorted to identify developing similarities. From this process, themes emerged. Following the independent open coding, the authors compared their findings and worked to agree on the qualitative themes. The authors typically agreed on the sorting of key data and quotes into categories; however, much of the discussion was centered on titling the themes. This process provided interrater reliability of concepts and themes.

### **Time Period One**

#### *Students' Reflections.*

Included as part of their weekly logs, students recorded their reactions to their experiences. The reflection questions were assigned by the instructor for the purpose of assessing the students' learning and to promote the critical assessment of their professional development. The questions required students to draw from their readings, the NASW Code of Ethics, lecture, and lessons learned from the projects. In addition to material focused on the academic content of the course, over the course of the term students responded to reflection prompts such as "Describe your past political engagement. What excites you and scares you about the service-learning project?" and "Select one topic discussed in class/presented in the reading. Summarize your understanding of the topic. How does the concept apply to your work on the service-learning project?" The written responses were collected and coded by themes.

#### *Focus Group.*

On the last day of class, students were asked by the instructor to respond in writing to open-ended questions and to discuss their responses with the class. This was not graded and students were told the purpose was to reflect on learning and for the instructor to improve the course for future students. The written responses were collected and coded by themes.

### **Time Period Two**

Fifteen months following the completion

of the course, qualitative and quantitative data were collected from the student participants. The students were contacted via email to request their voluntary participation in the follow-up project. Nine students replied to this request. Students participated in a 45-minute qualitative interview with the first author who was not involved with the course, but was completing data collection for her MSW thesis. Students were compensated with \$15 for their time and travel expenses. The interview consisted of 14 open-ended questions related to the students' experiences in the policy course. The questions were designed to assess the students' experiences in the course and how the learning may (or may not have) been influenced by the service-learning. Examples of questions were, "Did the service-learning experience help you develop as a micro (also mezzo and macro) level social worker? If so, how and did the service-learning experience change your attitude about policy? If so, how/why?"

In addition, based on the work of Rocha (2000), participants were given a list of policy activities (e.g., communicating with elected officials, participating in community meetings on public policy issues, voting, or joining a citizen action group) and asked to indicate which, if any, behaviors they had engaged in since the course ended. Given the small sample size, the responses were tabulated for each question and reported; only the mean, standard deviation, and range was reported for overall participation in policy activities.

### **Results**

#### *Description of Students*

Sixteen students were enrolled in the course. Of the 16, 14 were Caucasian women; one was an African American woman; and one was an African-American male. The median age was 31.60 (range 20–58, SD = 12.92). All of the students started their senior practicum within two quarters of completing the policy course.

Nine students who participated in the policy course volunteered to participate in the follow-up interviews 15 months after the course ended. Of the nine students, seven were Caucasian females, one was an African-American male, and one student was an African-American female. The median age of the participants was 36 (range 22–59, SD = 14.7).

## Time Period One

### *Student Reflection Logs*

Included as part of their weekly logs, students recorded their reactions to their experiences. Reflection questions were assigned by the instructor for the purpose of assessing the students' learning and to promote the critical assessment of their professional development. The most common theme related to students' successfully using a skill. Examples of skills identified were talking to people in power about an issue (most common), report writing, and improving needs assessment. Examples of quotes that illustrate success in using a skill follow:

Before this project, I would hold back some questions I may want to ask. But now I have learned to ask things like "Can I have a copy of your budget?" or "Why are your prices so high?" (skill identified: talking to people in power)

I have found a new ability to call up complete strangers and speak with them about a political policy. I have found myself becoming more comfortable in talking with people about their opinions regarding this bill and setting up interviews. I have not always had confidence in myself and this project has been pushing me outside of my comfort zone. (skill identified: talking to people in power)

I worried about our group's writing. ... I thought, "Oh my god, we were giving the report to [an elected official]" and I wanted it to be good. We edited a lot. It wasn't like a regular paper that we were turning in [to the professor]. (skill identified: writing skills)

The limitations that students recognized were more difficult to classify. The limitations were more closely tied with the nature and tasks associated with the project rather than based on a social work skill. Limitations included not having enough time to work on the project, key informants refusing to return phone calls, lack of local interest in the bill, and frustration with group members. These challenges may have interfered with their skill development.

### *Focus Group Responses*

In written format and through a class discussion, students were asked to respond to four questions posed during the last class. The first question was, "Before this course, what were your attitudes about being involved in the political process?" Nine responses were classified as "related to fear." Examples of the fear students expressed are exemplified by the following quotations:

I wanted nothing to do with politics. I thought I wouldn't understand politics and I felt disconnected from my legislators.

I was scared. I never have been involved with politics and I was intimidated and did not think I would do well.

Similarly, three students admitted that they were uninterested in being involved with politics or macro practice. Comments went beyond fear and included statements like "I hate the thought of policy" and "My opinion does not matter so why bother." In contrast, three students expressed positive regard about the opportunity to engage in policy work.

The second question was, "What is your attitude about being involved in the political process today?" The participants' responses were classified into two themes: Confidence expressed because new skills and knowledge were acquired and desire to be involved in future advocacy and policy work. Twelve responses were classified as new skills and knowledge. Student sentiment was expressed in the following quotations:

I am very excited to say I have been a part of a bill. Helping it move forward has made me extremely proud. Advocating by doing something is what I have learned.

I have a voice and I know how to use it to better our society and for my future clients.

Three students expressed that their experiences lead them to embrace their own advocacy responsibilities. One student wrote: "My attitude has changed. I plan to become more involved in the political process. At one time in my life, politics meant only civil rights. Now politics includes social justice for everyone."

The final question was, "Is there anything

related to social work that you are more likely to do today than you were before the course started?" Eleven student responses were categorized as being more involved in policy work. Of those 11, 4 had specific plans of action, while 6 were less specific about how to be involved. Student responses included:

I will write to my representative because I truly know it is my social work duty.

Become politically active and speak up! Even if I don't get my representative to do what I want, I still have the POWER and the RIGHT and the DUTY to do something about policies that hurt others.

Three students talked about being more aware of policies. One student wrote "I feel like I pay more attention to the news so that I have an understanding of what is happening in the world." One student's behaviors were not going to be changed following the course. She stated: "Although I learned a lot about policy, I still don't want to have anything to do with it."

#### *Fifteen Month Follow-up*

A concern of the instructor of the course was that students were excited about policy and macro work because of their intense immersion in the topic and that the excitement and application of policy skills would not persist over time. Fifteen months following the completion of the course, qualitative and quantitative data were collected from nine students.

Three major themes emerged during the participants' interviews and demonstrated the connectedness between the students' experience with policy and the project. The themes were "engaging in the service-learning experience helped students learn about policy"; "engaging in the service-learning experience gave students confidence about policy skills"; and "engaging in the service-learning experience influenced policy behaviors."

#### **Theme 1—Engaging in the Service-Learning Experience Helped Students Learn about Policy.**

Students discussed how their learning experiences were enhanced by the project because it allowed for hands-on learning. The students reported how the projects provided a platform to apply what they had talked about in class or read to a real-world problem. Examples of statements

that illustrated students' positive regard for the service-learning project follow:

I think I would have been bored out of my mind [in a traditional course], because policy—I mean honestly I dreaded it—because it's policy and it's scary. With service-learning I got so comfortable with policy. I understood the material taught in class because I could apply it to what I was doing right then."

It would have been hard for me to learn and stay focused [in a traditional course] because I find sometimes policy...it's easier to see it than to just read about it. You know I can memorize what it takes to become a bill but to actually get out there and experience what it takes to get a motion moved, to see what public officials do...you actually get hands-on with it and it is so much better to learn by seeing it, experiencing it... hearing the words out of the senators' mouths was much more powerful than reading it from a textbook or writing a paper about it.

Service-learning made me more excited about policy. You know, "I can help change this."

#### **Theme 2—Engaging in the Service-Learning Experience Gave Students Confidence about Policy Skills.**

During the qualitative interviews, students were asked to talk about their experiences with policy. Participants discussed how the service-learning projects increased their personal and professional confidence. Students felt as though the projects inspired them to know that their voices were being heard. Examples:

Confidence was one of the things that I think that I took the most away from it [the course]. It was feeling that as a social work student, you have much more say about things than what you ever would have thought. I definitely did not know we have as much power or as much of a voice as we do.

I love service-learning... it gives people the confidence. It gives students the confidence because we got to read about it and then I got to see it. Without the service-learning project, there would have been no way that I would have been able to testify in front of the Senate. I wouldn't have had half of the educational experiences I've had over the past year without that class.

### **Theme 3—Engaging in the Service-Learning Influenced Policy Behaviors.**

A third theme that emerged was the concept of the service-learning projects creating lasting behavioral changes for students. Following the course, the students were able to participate in a variety of experiences including testifying before the State Senate, presenting their policy project at a professional conference, interviewing senators, and talking with social work professionals and citizens in the community about their thoughts regarding policy issues. Through these activities, students were able to participate in the political process and begin to develop a macro skill set. One student discussed her views on political behaviors. She explained:

They [elected officials] don't know anything that is going on if the public doesn't write letters or let them know what is going on. I'm a big advocate now for writing letters to my representative. That is what has changed after the class, because now I realize the importance of it. I thought they probably get thousands of letters, but they really don't. It is a big thing in order to produce change in laws for our clients.

Based on the political engagement of the students and their positive regard toward policy, it is important to recognize the level of commitment demonstrated by the students after the conclusion of the course. Students may have engaged in political behaviors because of the awareness and civic duty instilled in them during the service-learning project. Students' comments about their involvement in political activities are expressed in the following statements:

I sent a letter and I gave out envelopes to

others. I do a 12-step program and I do a support group and 13 of the participants sent letters about this bill. Some of them also made phone calls. I would never have done that before this class.

The four of us that were working on the bill wondered what was happening with the bill so we called up to Senator X's office just to see. He keeps telling us that we are his contacts when he reinvents the bill. He is going reintroduce it and change it a little bit based on we learned and what we educated him about the bill. He has taken the changes to heart what we found. We are still keeping in contact.

### **Participation in Policy Behaviors**

Based on the policy skills outlined by Rocha (2000), students were asked about their engagement with policy actions following the policy course. During the interviews, students were asked about their involvement in nine political activities since the conclusion of the policy course.

On average, students had participated in four policy tasks ( $x=4.4$ , standard deviation = 2.4, range = 2–8) since the course ended. Policy behaviors included using the internet to find information about controversial issues related to social welfare policy ( $n = 8$ ); voting ( $n = 7$ ); calling, emailing, or writing an elected official ( $n = 7$ ); working on a specific policy change effort ( $n = 6$ ); meeting with a public official ( $n = 4$ ); participating as a member of a coalition or a committee working on a political issue of change ( $n = 3$ ); being active in a political coalition ( $n = 2$ ); being instrumental in organizing a political activity ( $n = 2$ ); and sending a letter to the editor or having written an opinion/ editorial piece ( $n = 1$ ).

### **Discussion**

Based on information collected from students in this course, the service-learning project helped the students develop policy skills (e.g., talking to people in power about an issue, report writing, assessing needs) and professional confidence. Three themes were determined to have impact on the students' experiences. The themes were: 1) The experience helped students learn about policy; 2) it gave students confidence about policy skills; and 3) it influenced policy behaviors.

The majority of the students reported that through hands-on learning and reality-based experiences, they were empowered to participate

in the macro process. These students also asserted that the project enabled them to gain a better understanding of policy. Eight of the nine students who participated in the 15-month follow-up interviews reported that the project changed their attitude about social welfare policy and enhanced their overall learning experience.

The finding of increased competency was also important, as students may be more likely to participate in macro practice as direct service providers because they feel they have the skills necessary to engage in a task. Students reported increased engagement in policy activities following the conclusion of the policy course. With new confidence and new macro skills developed, students were able to continue their involvement with their own projects and participate in new macro opportunities. Because of the participants' feelings of positive regard for the service-learning projects and the course, the students may be more likely to participate in political activities as they advance in their careers.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations to this study. One limitation was the small sample size. Sixteen students participated in the first data collection, while nine students participated in the follow-up. Also, data were not collected from the students prior to the start of the policy class that may have influenced the findings. However, the qualitative data indicated that students retrospectively reflected that they were fearful and reported disliking policy prior to the class.

Additionally, there were multiple factors, both personal and related to the class structure, which may have attributed to the students' evaluations of the service-learning experiences and their experiences with social work policy. For example, some students were able to work on their first choice project, while others were not. The personalities and characteristics of the instructor and the community partners may have influenced students' enthusiasm toward policy practice and the assessment of their skills.

Issues related to maturation may have also impacted the participants' behaviors or attitudes at the 15-month follow-up. Participants had participated in a 425-hour senior practicum experience and may have taken their first professional job by the time the follow-up interview occurred. It is impossible to determine if the service-learning experience was fully responsible for the participants' positive regard toward policy

or behavioral changes as there was no comparison group. However, the work by Rocha (2000), which had a comparison group that did not participate in a service-learning component, suggests that service-learning experiences can account for some increase in policy behaviors.

### **Implications for Social Work Education, Practice, and Research**

This service-learning experience supports previous research which indicates the effectiveness of using service-learning in a policy course. Droppa (2007) and Rocha (2000) found that students had increased competency and engagement in policy practice following service-learning projects. Rocha (2000) also described that students believed policy activities were important to social work practice. Students reported that this was influenced by the service-learning component of the course.

The major implication for social work practice is that service-learning is an approach that has the potential to generate student interest in macro practice. This pedagogy may advance social work values such as social justice, service, and obligations of practitioners to be macro change agents, values which have shown to be less understood by BSW students (Majewski, 2007). Service-learning allows students to become actively involved in the real world application of values and become proponents of social change. The feedback from students involved with this project suggests that service-learning helps social work students renegotiate their personal and professional identities to include being a macro practitioner. Further, it suggests that this confidence may propel students to engage in policy behaviors.

Social work educators and researchers should continue to evaluate if service-learning increases students' learning and promotes professionalism in the field. Future researchers should consider employing a comparison group and a larger sample to determine if service-learning is responsible for behavioral and attitudinal changes about policy practice.

While this project focused on social work curriculum and students, the lessons learned about engagement are applicable to related majors such as sociology, criminal justice, teacher education, nursing, and other disciplines which have a policy course in the curriculum. If students feel disenfranchised from the political process or do not make the link between their direct practice as police officers, teacher, or nurses, they may be less inclined to use their professional knowledge

to shape public policy in their fields. As such, preparing students to participate in the current political climate should be of concern to all disciplines.

## Conclusion

Social work students enter a complex and changing practice arena. Students need to have critical thinking, practice skills, and theoretical understanding to participate in solving social problems. Service-learning pedagogy may be a vehicle in which to expose students to society's needs and potential solutions. In 1994, Courtney and Specht described how social workers had become "unfaithful angels" to the profession's mission of social change. If BSW students increase their political skill competencies and feel empowered to make macro level changes through service-learning experiences, they may help reshape the future of the profession and return us to a time when community organizing, activism, and social justice were the hallmark of the profession. Service-learning, specifically in the macro and policy classes, may help create a new generation of social work practitioners who have a career centered on social change. Ultimately, this changes the lives of clients through the creation of more socially just policies that promote a better, more equitable society.

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## About the Authors

Tarin Mink is a mental health therapist at Samaritan Behavioral Health, Inc., in Dayton, Ohio. Sarah Twill is an associate professor of social work at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.